



Judaism as Philosophy

Studies in Maimonides and
the Medieval Jewish Philosophers
of Provence

HOWARD KREISEL



Emunot: Jewish
Philosophy and
Kabbalah

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EMUNOT: JEWISH PHILOSOPHY AND KABBALAH

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To the memory of
my mother, Helen Kreisel
[née Saremsky]





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Acknowledgements

In the past decade and a half, most of my academic activity has been devoted to producing annotated editions of important medieval Jewish philosophic treatises written in Provence that had not been published till now. On occasion I would also write articles, many of them in response to invitations to deal with a general topic in medieval Jewish philosophy for one of the more popular series of collected essays. Thus when I was approached a number of years ago by Dr. Igor Nemirovsky at the suggestion of Professor Dov Schwartz to contribute a volume of my articles to the series “Emunot: Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah,” published by the Academic Studies Press, I was at first reluctant to do so. I had no desire to present simply a compilation of articles. I preferred a book devoted to a central theme, in the model of my previous book of articles, *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, and I was not sure that I could put together another book of this nature. Upon further reflection, I realized that insofar as much of my research during this period focused on Maimonides and his reception in Provence, I could in fact dedicate a book to this topic. This undertaking would

entail, however, translating and editing an extensive amount of material that I had written in Hebrew, in addition to reediting a number of articles written in English. With this in mind, I accepted Dr. Nemirovsky's proposal.

The process took far longer and it involved far more work than I originally envisioned. Seven of the eleven chapters in this volume are based on writings that appeared till now only in Hebrew. I myself translated these writings, while at the same time I revised them extensively. I rearranged some of the discussions, added or modified many points, and also attempted to eliminate much of the redundant material. Four other chapters appeared originally as English articles, to which I also introduced a fair number of revisions. In all the chapters I included cross references to other chapters in the volume. In short, I have tried to create more of a cohesive book than simply a collection of diverse articles. It is my sincere hope that for the non-Hebrew reader, this volume will help to illuminate the thought of some very interesting but lesser known Provençal Jewish thinkers with whom I have dealt previously mostly in my Hebrew writings. This volume is also intended as a contribution to the understanding of how the Provençal thinkers of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries read Maimonides and the scope of his influence on them, as well as to how I think the modern reader should read Maimonides.

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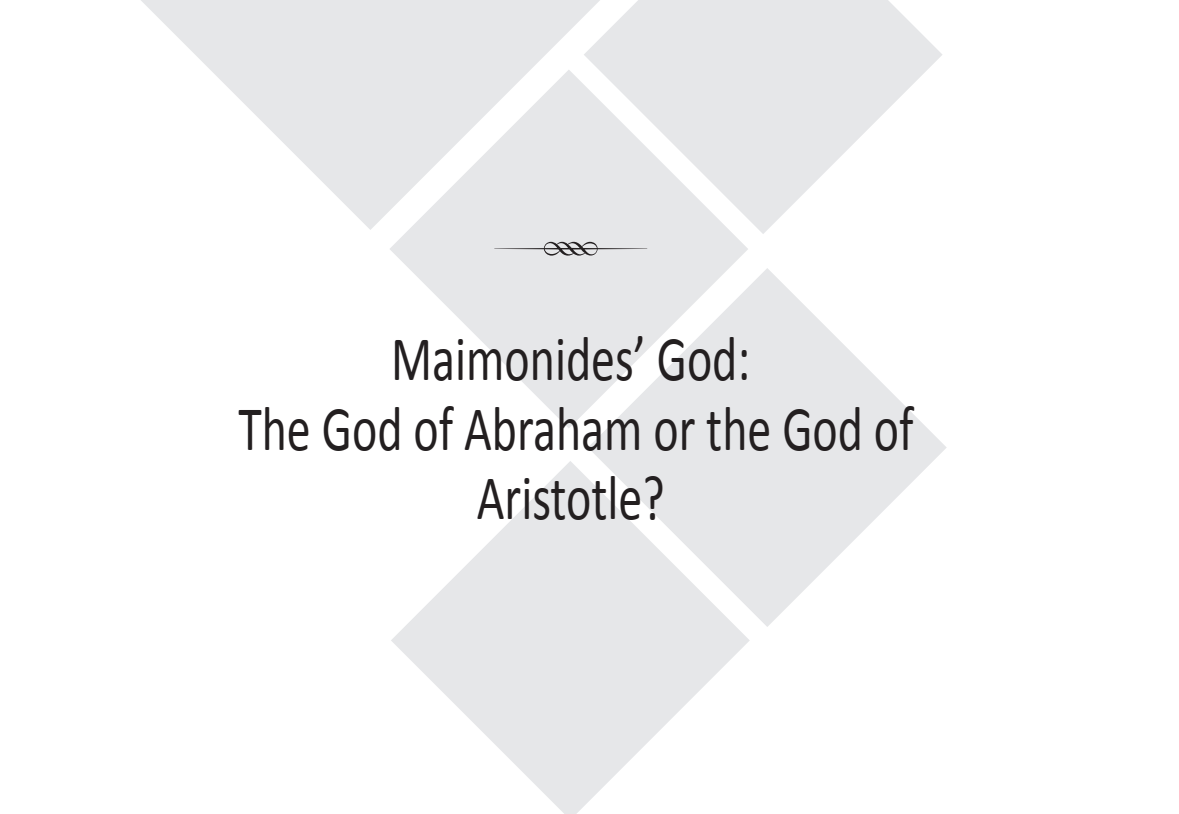
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Howard (Haim) Kreisel
Beer-Sheva, Israel

Section I

Maimonides





Maimonides' God: The God of Abraham or the God of Aristotle?

In a famous passage of the *Kuzari*, Judah Halevi contrasts the God of Aristotle, who is referred to as *Elohim* and known by reason, with the God of Abraham, whose name is the Tetragrammaton and who is known by prophetic illumination. The former is the God of nature, who governs the world by a fixed order. The latter is the God of history, who is aware of all that occurs in the world and exercises personal providence that is not limited to the workings of nature. The two views of God elicit two different responses in human beings, as the Khazar king notes:

One passionately yearns for Adonai with a passion that involves both “taste” and testament, while attachment to *Elohim* is by way of speculation. The passion involving “taste” compels one to devote oneself to the love of God and be prepared to die for God’s sake. Speculation, on the other hand, makes the honor of God a necessity only as long as it entails no harm or hardship for the sake of God. Hence one may excuse Aristotle if he was lax in

the observance of the law, since he doubted whether God is cognizant of it. (*Kuzari* 4.16)¹

Who then is Maimonides' God? The answer appears to be clear in light of Maimonides' description of the commandment to sanctify God, which he presents in the *Book of Commandments* (positive commandment no. 9):

We are commanded to publicize the true religion, with no fear of the injury inflicted by an adversary. Even if an oppressor coerces us to deny God, we should not obey him but rather surrender ourselves to death. We should not even attempt to deceive him into thinking that we deny God, though in our hearts we continue to believe in God. This is the commandment to sanctify God, which is incumbent upon all Israel; that is to say, in our love of God and belief in God's unity we surrender ourselves to be put to death by the oppressor.²

Maimonides' description is reminiscent of that of Judah Halevi regarding the readiness on the part of one who knows the God of Abraham, the God of history, to surrender one's life for the sake of one's belief.³ This is not to deny that Maimonides' God is also the God of Aristotle, for Abraham too knew God as *Elohim*,⁴ nor to ignore the fact that Maimonides, in many of his writings, encourages his readers

1 All translations in this chapter are my own unless noted otherwise. For the Arabic see David Baneth (ed.), *Al-Kitāb Al-Khazari* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1977), 168-9. The notion of "taste" in reference to God is reminiscent of Sufi notions; see Diana Lobel, *Between Mysticism and Philosophy: Sufi Language of Religious Experience in Judah Halevi's Kuzari* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 95-100.

2 Joseph Kafih (ed. and Hebrew trans.), *Sefer Hamitzvot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1971), 63.

3 For the relation between Maimonides and Halevi and the likelihood that Maimonides was acquainted with the *Kuzari* see Howard Kreisel, "Judah Halevi's Influence on Maimonides: A Preliminary Appraisal," *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 95-121.

4 See Maimonides' description of Abraham's discovery of the existence of God in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1.3 and contrast this description with Laws of Principles of the Torah 1.5, 7. In both passages God is known as the Aristotelian First Mover and Prime Cause of the world. Halevi accepts the philosophers' view of God as First Cause, and he accepts as well their conception of nature, as opposed to the belief in occasionalism characterizing most of the Moslem theologians (the *mutakallimūn*); see *Kuzari* 5.20. Yet in contrast to the philosophers he believes in a deity that acts outside the boundaries of the order of nature.

to appreciate more this name of God, the aspect of divine activity that results in the order of nature.⁵ This point notwithstanding, Maimonides does not appear to abandon the conception of the personal God of Abraham that lies at the heart of Jewish tradition. In extending divine providence, God may not intervene as much in the order of nature as the masses would have it, but God is cognizant of all that occurs, rewards and punishes accordingly, and still plays an immediate role in determining at least some events of history, most notably the Giving of the Torah at Sinai—or so it appears to be the case for Maimonides.⁶ Is it not then for the God of Abraham that Maimonides' soul passionately yearns, just as is the case for Halevi before him?

There is, however, another way of understanding Maimonides' approach. Perhaps he is of the opinion that Abraham's response remains the one that is most appropriate even for the God of Aristotle. That is to say, Maimonides thinks that one should passionately yearn for *Elohim*, the God of nature, as a matter of "taste" and testament and not simply view *Elohim* as an object of cold contemplation, as opposed to Halevi's characterization of the philosophers' approach. The apprehension of God by way of philosophic speculation is what leads to the desire and, moreover, the internal feeling of compulsion to publicize the truth of the unity of God to all of humanity, even if it endangers oneself.⁷ In his treatment of the commandment to love God, Maimonides writes in a previous passage in the *Book of the Commandments* (positive commandment no. 3):

5 See, in particular, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2.10. All English citations from this book in this volume are taken from Shlomo Pines (trans.), *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

6 For a survey of these topics in Maimonides' thought and the different possibilities for interpreting his approach, see Howard Kreisel, "Moses Maimonides," in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1996), 245-280.

7 See *Guide* 2.37, where Maimonides compares the internal compulsion experienced by the prophets to call upon the nation to serve God to that experienced by the philosophers to communicate to others the truths they had learnt. In all likelihood, Maimonides was acquainted with the fact that Socrates in his passionate commitment to truth was prepared to die rather than cease his teachings.

We have explained to you that by way of contemplation one attains knowledge [of God] and finds felicity; love [of God] necessarily follows. They [the sages] have stated that this commandment [to love God] includes calling upon all humanity to worship and believe in God. That is to say, by way of analogy, when one loves someone, one glorifies and praises that person and calls upon others to befriend that person. Similarly, if you truly love God in accordance with the knowledge of God that you attain, you will undoubtedly call upon the foolish and the ignorant to discern the truth that you have discerned. . . . Just as Abraham, who loved God—as Scripture attests by [God referring to him as] *Abraham, my lover* [Isaiah 41:8]—by virtue of the strength of his intellectual attainment, and called upon humanity to believe in God as a result of his love for God, so one must love God till one calls upon others to [believe in] God.⁸

According to Maimonides, Abraham's belief in God resulted from his philosophic speculation. In other words, Abraham apprehended the God of Aristotle and this apprehension led to his passionate love of God, described by Maimonides in this passage as well as in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 4.12, where he writes:

When the human being contemplates these matters and knows all the existents—the angel [Separate Intellect], sphere, human being, and so on—and discerns the wisdom of God in all the existents and creatures, his love for God increases and his soul thirsts and flesh yearns to love God, blessed be He.⁹

Nevertheless, this alternative interpretation that one passionately loves the God of nature appears problematic. How can I yearn for a God who does not know *me*? Why should one be so devoted to a divine law

8 Kafih, *Sefer Hamitzvot*, 59.

9 See also *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 2.2; Laws of Repentance 10.6. In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides ties the true love of God solely to the philosophic understanding of the order of existence. For a study of Maimonides' approach to the love of God, see Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 225-266. It is interesting to note that in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Abraham is no longer viewed as an Aristotelian philosopher but one who proves the existence of God on the basis of the creation of the world; see *Guide* 2.13. In this case Maimonides adopts a more exoteric philosophic stance in his legal work than in his theological one, as some scholars have already pointed out. For a discussion of this point see Kreisel, "Moses Maimonides," 216-223.

whose immediate author can not be God, for Aristotle's God is incapable of such action, and who is also ignorant of my observance of the commandments, let alone of my emotional state. How could Maimonides, who dedicated all his major works to the God of Abraham by opening them with the verse *in the name of God the Lord of the world* [Genesis 21:33],¹⁰ have thought that Abraham's God and Aristotle's God are in fact the same? Is it not strange, if not ludicrous, to think that Maimonides the great Jewish legal scholar is in fact committed solely to the God of nature?

This fundamental problem has confronted Maimonides' commentators from his own time to the present. Those who maintain that Maimonides' true view essentially conforms to the world view of the medieval Aristotelian philosophers, and this is the esoteric position that he conceals in the *Guide*, have struggled and continue to struggle to show on the basis of his writings that he holds such a position.¹¹ Most, though not all, who argued this position in the medieval world

10 God in the verse is referred to by the Tetragrammaton. In Maimonides' interpretation, the verse refers to Abraham's teaching others the monotheistic idea; see *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1.3; *Guide* 3.29. Maimonides opens the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, *Book of Commandments*, each book of the *Mishneh Torah*, and each part of the *Guide* with this verse, not only conforming thereby with the accepted Arabic practice of dedicating religious works to the name of God but also indicating that in all these writings he is following in the footsteps of Abraham.

11 For a discussion of the esoteric interpretation of Maimonides through the ages, see in particular Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 159-207. It is not my contention that all those through the ages who interpreted Maimonides as holding an esoteric opinion on a given issue were of the view that he agreed completely with the Aristotelian world view. Rather, my claim is that those who adopted such an interpretation generally attempted to show Maimonides' agreement with the philosophical approach on the issue in question. There are certainly differences of opinion among the commentators on what issues Maimonides concealed his true opinion, let alone whether he held esoteric opinions at all. I am also not claiming that the only reason for Maimonides' esotericism was to hide his agreement with Aristotelian philosophy because of the dangers of the views advanced by Aristotle and his medieval Islamic followers to the naïve faith of the masses, though I am of the opinion that this was his primary motivation. Moreover, this was the reason advanced by those of Maimonides' medieval followers who interpreted him as holding esoteric positions. For a different approach to the reasons for Maimonides' esotericism see, for example, Yair Loberbaum, "On Contradictions, Rationality,

did so not in order to criticize Maimonides, but because they themselves felt it as the true view of God and God's relation to the world. The early interpreters of the *Guide* in Provence, beginning with Samuel Ibn Tibbon and his followers, developed the esoteric approach to Maimonides' magnum opus and saw themselves not only as his interpreters but also his true disciples, even if they did not agree with him on all issues.¹² The problem they faced was how to bridge between belief in the Torah and all that this entails and belief in a deity whose relation to the world is that which Aristotle posited.

Let us return for a moment to Judah Halevi, the Jewish thinker who has gone down in history as the great antagonist of Aristotelian philosophy, the Jewish counterpart to the great Islamic thinker Al-Ghazali.¹³ Halevi is well aware that if his criticism of the philosophers is correct, one would expect them to practice all forms of moral and religious debauchery. If God is not aware of human actions, all moral restraints on human behavior are removed. Yet as the king of the Khazars points out:

I see you criticizing the philosophers by attributing to them that of which the contrary is known. Of a person who lives in seclusion and divorces himself from the pleasures of the world, we say he is engaged

Dialectics and Esotericism in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Metaphysics* 55 (2002): 711-750. For a further discussion of this issue see below, chapters 2 and 7.

- 12 For Samuel Ibn Tibbon's importance for the subsequent esoteric interpretation of Maimonides see, in particular, Aviezer Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87-123. See also Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel Ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of Dalālat al-Hā'irim into the Moreh Nevukhim*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007) (Heb.).
- 13 This is not the place to deal with the question of the extent to which Halevi is influenced by the very philosophy which he purportedly rejects. In a number of articles I attempted to show the decisive influence exerted by Aristotelian philosophy on Halevi's thought; see, for example, Howard Kreisel, "Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*: Between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle," in *Joodse filosofie tussen rede en traditie*, ed. Reinier Munk and F. J. Hoogewoud (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 24-34. On the relation between Halevi and Al-Ghazali see David Baneth, "R. Judah Halevi and Al-Gazali," *Keneset* 7 (1942): 311-329 (Heb.). For the reception of Halevi through the ages see Adam Shear, *The Kuzari and the Shaping of Jewish Identity: 1167-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

in philosophy and shares the views of the philosophers. You, on the other hand, deny them every good action. (*Kuzari* 4.18)

Halevi's response to this criticism is worthy of note:

What I told you is the foundation of their belief, namely, that the highest human happiness lies in the knowledge of the speculative sciences. By grasping the forms of the existents by the *hylic* intellect and becoming an intellect *in actu*, and then an acquired intellect close to the rank of the Active Intellect, one no longer experiences death. This, however, can only be obtained by devoting one's life to study and continuous contemplation, which is incompatible with worldly pursuits. For this reason, the philosophers divorced themselves from the pursuit of wealth, glory, corporeal pleasures, and children, in order not to be distracted in their studies. As soon as one has become learned in accordance with the final goal of the sought-after knowledge, the individual is no longer scrupulous in his actions. The philosophers do not practice humility for the sake of reward, nor do they think that if they steal or murder they will be punished. They command the good and prohibit evil in the best and most excellent manner, in order to resemble the Creator who arranged everything perfectly. They have devised social laws without binding force, and which are conditional and may be overridden in times of need. The religious law, however, is not so except in its social parts, and the law itself sets down those which permit exceptions and those which do not. (*Kuzari* 4.19)

Halevi's description of the philosophers' approach is designed to impress upon the reader the view that they do not see in morality a binding obligation governing one's behavior, but rather a useful suggestion of how one is to behave.¹⁴ Yet this conclusion is problematic in light of Halevi's own words. He is aware of the fact that the world view of the philosophers demands one to lead a completely moral life. Though they may regard it as a means to intellectual perfection, they view it as a *necessary* means. Moreover, for the medieval Aristotelian

14 Leo Strauss devoted an important article to examining and defending Halevi's philosophical critique of the philosophers' position on this issue; see Leo Strauss, "The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*," *PAAJR* 13 (1943): 47-96. See also Howard Kreisel, "Judah Halevi and the Problem of Philosophical Ethics, in *Between Religion and Ethics*, ed. Avi Sagi and Daniel Statman (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1993), 171-183 (Heb.).

philosophers who were strongly influenced by Neoplatonic thought, the moral life is not solely a *means* to perfection but an *aspect* of perfection. It provides the foundation for a life of *imitatio Dei*¹⁵—another point Halevi mentions in this context. At the beginning of his treatise, Halevi ascribes to the philosopher the view that one who attains intellectual perfection always performs the most noble actions, as if his soul is governed by the Active Intellect.¹⁶ In light of these positions, one may question how compelling is Halevi's criticism of the philosophers that they do not fear God for the sake of reward or think that stealing or murdering will merit punishment. While they may not live moral lives for the sake of reward or punishment on the part of a personal deity who is watching everything they do, they do so because of the inherent worth of this mode of life. In short, even Halevi concedes that the morality preached and practiced by the philosophers is integrally related to their world view. The God of Aristotle provides the foundation not only for the physical order of the world but also for the moral one. In light of this point, we may well ask whether the intrinsic value of morality does not provide a more solid basis for its binding nature than any external rewards and punishments that result from its practice or non-practice. Moreover, Halevi indicates at the beginning of his treatise that the philosophers see their lifestyle, which combines strict morality with intensive contemplation, as inevitably resulting in the highest form of human happiness, one that is divine in nature as well as eternal.¹⁷

Halevi's essentially laudatory characterization of the philosophers' approach, even if unintended, is certainly justified in light of the medieval Aristotelian tradition. Aristotle himself appears to hold a natural

15 For different models of *imitatio Dei* in medieval philosophy, see Lawrence Berman, "The Political Interpretation of the Maxim: The Purpose of Philosophy is the Imitation of God," *Studia Islamica* 15 (1961): 53-61.

16 *Kuzari* 1.1.

17 It should be added that Halevi is disingenuous when he indicates that the philosophers after attaining their goal can permit themselves immoral actions when convenient. He himself notes when presenting their thought at the beginning of the treatise that after attaining perfection the person naturally performs only the noblest actions, as if he is guided completely by the supernal intellect.

law theory, though he does not regard even those moral propositions acknowledged by rational individuals as having the same level of certainty as those belonging to the theoretical sciences, which are known either intuitively by the intellect or by demonstrative proof.¹⁸ Ideally, natural law, which does not vary in time or place, serves as the universal framework for all conventional laws.¹⁹ In general, Aristotle's conception of morality is strongly related to his conception of nature. As is the case with all species, human beings too strive to survive and to continue to propagate their species. In addition, they desire to achieve happiness. They are by nature social animals, requiring society to satisfy their material needs as well as the psychological need for companionship. This goal requires a government that organizes their dealings with each other and insures that they do not harm one another. In short, some level of morality is required of human beings by nature. This morality may be viewed as "utilitarian," but the goal it serves is one embedded in the nature of humanity. The higher goal of humanity is to attain human perfection and the felicity attending this state, and for Aristotle this lies in the perfection of the theoretical intellect. This ultimate goal is not given to human choice, though one may choose to pursue it or not, and few are naturally equipped to do so; nonetheless, it is a goal embedded in the natural order of the world. Achieving moral character traits is a necessary condition for attaining this goal. This at least appears to be the implicit message emerging from his *Nicomachean Ethics*, which concludes with a discussion of the perfection of the intellect.²⁰ This view was made explicit by the medieval Aristotelian philosophers, in particular Alfarabi.²¹

18 See Aristotle, *Topics* 1, 10, 104a. Moral propositions are dialectical rather than demonstrative in character.

19 See Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1, 13, 1373b.

20 While Aristotle himself draws no direct link between moral virtue and intellectual perfection, his choice to conclude a treatise on ethics by focusing on the latter suggests such a link in his thought. See Marvin Fox, "The Doctrine of the Mean in Aristotle and Maimonides: A Comparative Study," *Interpreting Maimonides: Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 100-109.

21 In many of his writings, Alfarabi sees the role of the ideal polity as advancing true happiness, which he equates with intellectual perfection, by instilling in its

While the dictates of morality are not known by theoretical reason but by practical reason—which is the faculty that explores how to best achieve a given end—these dictates are not viewed as a matter of purely subjective judgment. One simply cannot achieve final perfection while retaining character traits that reflect the victory of corporeal passions over reason. One prone to anger or constantly preoccupied with one’s physical appetites cannot achieve the equanimity of the soul that is demanded for the attainment of ultimate perfection, despite the fact that one may still be very smart and learn a great deal of science. For the Aristotelian philosopher, nature is not value-free, but values, if not also specific moral dictates, are an integral part of the order of the world. To live a truly human, that is to say divine, life, one must devote oneself to a life of intellect and the moral virtues that enable one to live such a life. Moreover, the ultimate reward, the felicity of the intellect contemplating the eternal truths, is also built into the order of existence. The masses may not fully appreciate this fact and may need to be inculcated to believe in a personal God in order to prevent them from always capitulating to their corporeal desires and from living as animals. Myths that support the law and are a mode for communicating fundamental truths in a figurative manner must be devised for their benefit, a point made by Plato in his *Republic*, and greatly appreciated by the medieval philosophers, as Halevi’s “philosopher” indicates at the beginning of the *Kuzari*. The true philosopher, however, understands that virtue, intellectual and moral, is in fact its own reward.

Thus the medieval Jewish philosopher who favors the God of Aristotle does not in the process undermine morality or reject the notion of eternal felicity that is inherently connected with the type of life one lives. This philosopher does not cease to yearn for God and to live a life that can be considered truly divine—not simply as a matter of existential choice but also philosophic necessity. The problem with which the Jewish Aristotelian philosopher must grapple is *why Judaism?* How does Judaism fit into this picture? If God is not the immediate author of Jewish law, then what advantage does Judaism hold over the other

members moral virtue and inculcating true opinions. This view was to exercise a decisive influence on Maimonides’ approach.

religions or over other legislations, and why should one continue to observe its dictates?

Maimonides' answer according to the esotericist interpretation is that Moses attained the highest level of intellectual illumination possible for human beings, thereby enabling him to formulate the optimal law for a political polity, one that best directs society to the pursuit of perfection. Only such a law deserves to be labeled "divine." This interpretation, I would like to stress, is not found only among Maimonides' modern interpreters but is alluded to previously by some medieval ones. Nissim of Marseille comes close to making this view explicit, as we shall see.²² The ceremonial commandments, according to this view, are crucial for the Law's pedagogical role, particularly in constantly reinforcing belief in one God and reminding the community of other speculative truths, a point that Maimonides himself repeatedly states in his discussion of the reasons for the commandments.²³ The wedding of Aristotle and Judaism is not without many difficult problems, some of them seemingly insurmountable, even when viewed in its medieval context. The crucial point is that medieval Aristotelianism shared enough in common with revelatory religion to make such a reinterpretation of Judaism conceivable. The medieval Aristotelian view that there is only one God who remains unceasingly both the First Mover of all that changes and the First Cause of all that exists and is also the Supreme Intellect, the notion of a completely ordered world in which nothing in vain occurs in nature, Plato's philosopher-king turned into Alfarabi's prophet-legislator, with revelation being treated as a natural phenomenon involving the illumination of the perfect intellect, the notion of virtuous existence, both morally and intellectually, that brings with it the greatest felicity and is the goal of life, the notion of *imitatio Dei*, and the philosophic view of religion as presenting these truths in imaginative form as suited for society at large were seen as providing the philosophic foundation for a true understanding of the sacred texts of Judaism—both the speculative teachings these texts contain and the purpose of the commandments they enjoin. Jewish

22 See below, chapter 6, 171-173. This issue will be explored further in chapter 9.

23 See, for example, *Guide* 3.28.

virtue, in the fields of speculation and morality, could be viewed as the best expression of philosophic virtue; Moses the lawgiver could be seen as representing the epitome of *human* perfection.

The subsequent undermining of Aristotle's physical and metaphysical view of the world also undermined the philosophic foundations for moral virtue that characterize medieval Aristotelian philosophy. Baruch Spinoza thought that he could build a firmer philosophical foundation for morality on the basis of his philosophic system as developed in the *Ethics*. His view of morality in a crucial sense suggests a desire to hold onto this area of medieval Aristotelianism, while throwing out the rest of the system. He certainly shares with the medieval Aristotelians the notion that human perfection and the road to it is built into the order of the world. Spinoza's God of nature, no less than Aristotle's God of nature, despite their fundamental differences, mandates moral virtue, and one may say also rewards it, even if in both these conceptions God is certainly not the personal deity of revelatory religion and has no intimate knowledge of virtuous individuals except in the most metaphorical of senses.

With Spinoza, the medieval esoteric interpretation of Maimonides, the interpretation that I consider the true interpretation of his thought, would appear to become basically obsolete from a philosophic perspective. Once Aristotelianism is no longer regarded as true, any interpretation of Judaism along these lines must also be regarded as false. With Maimonides' explicit agreement with Aristotle on so many fundamental points of his philosophy, and his interpretation of the Bible accordingly, the letter of his doctrine could no longer be accepted except by those who refused to recognize that the world has moved on. One may still try to keep the *spirit* of Maimonides alive by reinterpreting Judaism, if not also Maimonides himself, along new philosophic lines that are regarded as true. Spinoza tried to forestall any attempt to turn Maimonides into a Spinozist by adamantly rejecting the interpretation of Judaism along any philosophic lines. In other words, Spinoza sets out to destroy not only Aristotelianism but also any partnership between philosophy and revelatory religion that is the basis

for even the less radical interpretations of Maimonides' philosophy.²⁴ While in the medieval world one could be an Aristotelian philosopher while remaining committed to Jewish law and lore, in a manner that goes a long way in solving the conceptual contradiction that at first glance characterizes these two stances, one could certainly not be a dedicated Spinozist and remain committed to Jewish law and to the truth of Jewish lore. One could choose one or the other (or neither), but not both.

There were a good number of attempts after Spinoza to see Judaism as the highest expression of philosophic religion, attempts that were in tune with the contemporary philosophic climate. In many cases, these thinkers viewed Maimonides at least as a role model, if not also as providing specific ideas they regarded as still relevant.²⁵ Yet it is clear that the modern day academic interpreters of Maimonides' thought, who treat him as a closet Aristotelian (or even as a thinker who seeks to develop a philosophy that completely rejects Aristotle on certain fundamental issues while accepting him on others), can themselves no longer return to the world view of their medieval counterparts. One can no longer root one's own understanding of Judaism in Aristotle's teachings in light of the dramatic changes in science and philosophy that have taken place since medieval times. Today's God of nature may be incapable of demonstratively refuting the God of revelation, but neither can such a deity provide any foundation for revelatory religion. We are witness to endless present-day attempts to show the harmony between science and religion on some of the big questions, particularly creation, but mostly as part of an apologetic program to make room for the

24 See in particular Leo Strauss's characterization of Spinoza's approach to religion and his scathing critique of Spinoza on this cardinal issue in his *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965).

25 For example, thinkers as diverse as Moses Mendelssohn, Hermann Cohen, Leo Strauss, Joseph Soloveitchik, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz. Interestingly, some other philosophers found in Judah Halevi an even more profound source of inspiration, Franz Rosenzweig being one example. Maimonides proved to exert a particularly strong impact upon the early German Reform movement, which tended to reinterpret both him and Judaism along Kantian lines. See George Y. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides' Philosophy in 19th Century Germany: The Guide to Religious Reform* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

personal God of religion. Can one still move from science to morality or to Jewish law if one is committed to the *impersonal* God of nature, as the medieval Aristotelians were capable of doing? Can such a deity still invoke in us a passionate yearning, as it still was capable of doing even for Spinoza? Moreover, most of great modern existential philosophers, from Nietzsche onwards, premise their philosophies on the absence of God and the human being's complete autonomy in creating values (and not just discovering them), as opposed to the teachings of their great philosophical predecessors. Given this situation, how can we preserve the legacy of Maimonides even in spirit in today's world? What does it mean to preserve the spirit of Maimonides' philosophy?

As a scholar who has engaged many years in trying to understand Maimonides in his historical context, to capture the *letter* of his thought, to hear him as a medieval Jew might have, and, dare I say, should have heard him, I have trouble answering this question. I am looking for a Maimonides who has little if anything to teach contemporary Jews, certainly those who wish to live both in the world of traditional Judaism and remain intellectually honest in the face of scientific and philosophic developments. In many ways I feel more comfortable in the world of medieval Jewish Aristotelianism, to follow in the footsteps of Samuel Ibn Tibbon and Nissim of Marseille in how they understood the "Great Eagle" and developed their own thought accordingly, than in the world of modern thought. It is ironic, an irony that has existed with us from time immemorial, that those who have tried to keep Maimonides' legacy alive are those who have not interpreted him in the most accurate manner from a historical perspective, but have tried to translate the goals of his thought, as they understood them, for their contemporaries along the lines of the philosophy of their own time, even if their own philosophies would have left Maimonides himself greatly perplexed. These are the thinkers who have developed philosophical foundations for traditional Judaism that are in tune with their age and are not fundamentally apologetic in nature.

Yet perhaps I am being overly critical of the relevance of the academic study of Maimonides in today's world. The focal problem in the interpretation of Maimonides' philosophy remains for us today the

same one that confronted the medieval scholars: can one remain committed to Jewish law and lore and still accept a world view that denies the personal willful activity of the Deity? Can one be a loyal member of the religious community, yet see in the stories of the Torah the reflection of philosophical and scientific truths in imaginative form? Because of the continuous importance of this topic, we do not tire in returning again and again to the arguments that were offered in the Middle Ages regarding the true views of Maimonides—one of Judaism’s foremost legal authorities of all time—on the profound theological problems with which he deals. We continue to debate the issue of his esotericism, for at the heart of this issue lie the limits of the reformulation of Judaism as philosophy. If we can show that Maimonides went much further in his understanding of Judaism than simply locating it between Athens (Greek Philosophy) and Jerusalem (traditional Jewish beliefs), as emerges from an exoteric reading of his philosophy and which in itself is a radical approach, but he saw the way to the heavenly Jerusalem—the proper way to understand Jewish teachings and attain knowledge of the ultimate truths and perfection—as necessarily passing through Athens, with Jewish law serving as the ultimate practical expression of philosophical ideas, then the modern reader can gain an important perspective in appreciating today’s philosophic reformulations of Jewish belief, no matter how radical they appear to “orthodox” thinking Jews. Furthermore, the scholar can show that this issue and the controversy it raises is hardly new; rather it is characteristic of much of medieval Jewish thought, particularly in Provence, which gave birth to the most incisive esotericist readers of Maimonides’ philosophy as well as to the controversies their readings incurred. In short, it is a *traditional* conflict for how to view Judaism, even if on one side of the divide stands only a very small group, as Maimonides himself characterizes the Jewish philosophically minded elite. While it is not my purpose in this volume to build upon the legacy of Maimonides and his disciples in Provence, but to try to understand their legacy better, this understanding is of more than just “historical” interest in today’s efforts to develop Jewish thought within the traditional world.

So what is Maimonides' legacy? Certainly his fundamental teaching to his coreligionists is that the study of philosophy is both a religious obligation and the most noble of human activities, but one that must be rooted in Jewish law and lore and should be accompanied by a strong social component—guiding others to pursue the truth to the degree they are capable and to live just lives. This teaching remains as relevant today as in Maimonides' time. The philosophy most in keeping with his legacy is one that weds an unwavering commitment to Jewish tradition with an unwavering commitment to intellectual integrity in its interpretation of Judaism, one that carefully considers, builds upon, and challenges that which contemporary science and philosophy teach, and at the same time reflects a deep sense of social responsibility. This may no longer lead us to the God of Abraham or to the God of Aristotle, but it does lead us to the God of Maimonides.



Maimonides on Divine Religion

Let us posit the following hypothetical situation: a Jew approaches Maimonides toward the end of the latter's life and addresses him as follows:

Teach us our master. In your conclusion to the *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of Kings and their Wars 12.1) you write that in the days of the messiah all humanity will return to the true religion (*yaḥzeru qulam la-dat ha-emet*), and in your treatise the term “true religion” refers specifically to Judaism.¹ Does this mean that the entire world will eventually convert to Judaism?

In this situation as I imagine it, Maimonides hesitates for a brief of moment before answering affirmatively. In the messianic age, he proclaims, the entire world will convert to the one true divine religion, Judaism. In this chapter I will show why I am convinced that this is what Maimonides would answer, and why in the situation I envision he hesitates before responding. In this hesitation, he considers the issue

¹ See, for example, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Leavened and Unleavened Bread 7.4; Laws of Gifts for the Poor 10.1; Laws of Ḥagigah 3.1; Laws of Kings 4.10. See also *Book of Commandments*, positive commandment no. 9 (in Arabic: *al-din al-ḥaqīqī*).

from a number of perspectives that are discernible in his various writings. What these perspectives are will be the main subject of this chapter.

The issue that I raise is not a new one but has already been debated by scholars. The evidence for and against the conclusion that the whole world will convert to Judaism in the messianic times according to Maimonides is presented by Gerald Blidstein, who interprets Maimonides as avoiding the conclusion to which many of his express statements on the subject appear to lead. He feels that Maimonides views the gentiles in the messianic age as fellow travelers of the Jewish people, voluntarily engaging in many Jewish practices, without, however, becoming formal converts who observe the entire Torah.² Menachem Kellner, on the other hand, sees Maimonides as positing a world in which all gentiles formally embrace Judaism.³ Other scholars have examined issues that have an important bearing on this problem. Joel Kraemer, for example, has studied Maimonides' use of the Arabic terms for law—namely, *sharī'a*, which generally denotes religious or divine law, and *namus*, which generally denotes civil or human law. Kraemer shows that this distinction does not characterize all of Maimonides' usages of these terms.⁴ Avraham Nuriel's subsequent study of the term *sharī'a* in Maimonides' writings adds some important points to Kraemer's analysis. Nuriel concludes that Maimonides may have regarded the seven Noahite laws as a divine law, though an

2 See Gerald Blidstein, *Political Concepts in Maimonidean Halakha* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2001), 245-248 (Heb.).

3 See Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Judaism and the Jewish People* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 39-58. Kellner subsequently returned to this issue in an attempt to bolster his original conclusion; see his article, "Maimonides' True Religion—for Jews, or All Humanity," *Me'orot* 7 (2008) [reprinted in his *Science in the Bet Midrash: Studies in Maimonides* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 291-319].

4 See Joel L. Kraemer, "Namus and Sharī'a in the Philosophy of Maimonides," *Teudah* 4 (1986): 185-202 (Heb.). See also idem, "Naturalism and Universalism in Maimonides' Political and Religious Thought," in *Me'ab She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Ezra Fleischer et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 47-81.

imperfect or incomplete one.⁵ This leaves open the possibility that “true religion” (*dat emet*) in Maimonides’ depiction of the messianic future in fact refers to the Noahite laws, which will then be adopted by all gentiles. This interpretation finds further support from the use of the term “return to the true religion,” more appropriately referring to the Noahite commandments, which according to rabbinic tradition were practiced by the entire world when they were first promulgated, than to Mosaic Law.⁶ As we shall also see, Maimonides at times uses the term “true religion” in contexts that could not possibly refer to Judaism. David Sklare has delved into the historical background of this issue in the Islamic world, dealing with Islamic and Jewish theologians who addressed the issue of whether the entire world will or should be converted to one religion.⁷ While many theologians were of the opinion that ideally everyone should practice the same ultimate divine religion, and some were of the opinion that this goal should be attained even by coercion, Maimonides appears to adopt a middle position on this issue. He demands of all gentiles in pre-messianic times to practice only the seven Noahite laws, and states that they should even be coerced to do so in all places where Jewish sovereignty extends.⁸ Moreover, they must also acknowledge the Law of Moses as the source for the obligation of observing the Noahite laws.⁹

In his vision of the future, it is clear that Maimonides certainly does not posit a situation of forcible conversion of the gentiles to

5 See Avraham Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 165-171 (Heb.).

6 This argument, however, is not decisive. “Return” in this context does not necessarily refer to a situation in which one has already been; it may refer also to a situation that one should attain. This is evident in the phrase “to return in repentance” (*lāp̄zor beteshuvah*), which does not connote that the individual has started out completely righteous observing all the commandments.

7 See David Sklare, “Are the Gentiles Obligated to Observe the Torah? The Discussion Concerning the Universality of the Torah in the East in the Tenth and Eleventh Centuries,” in *Be’erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay Harris (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 311-346.

8 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and their Wars 6.4; 8.10

9 *Ibid.*, 8.11.

Judaism. Just as Moses did not command the conversion of gentiles,¹⁰ so will the king-messiah refrain from such an act. If they all convert, it is because they have grasped the eternal truth and validity of Judaism. Given Maimonides' conception of the nature of Judaism and the intellectual and spiritual enlightenment characterizing all nations in the messianic age, the logic of the argument that the whole world will become Jewish in his view is compelling. Gentiles would not settle for anything less than the one true divine legislation if they have come to realize the true purpose of life and the role played by Mosaic Law in attaining that purpose, have come to recognize the lies that their forefathers have taught them in promulgating Christianity and Islam, as Maimonides points out in *Laws of Kings* 11.8,¹¹ and finally, have no other religious option, at least no other complete religious law that can be considered divine. Maimonides is certainly adamant on the point that there was and always will be only one complete divine law—namely, the Law of Moses.¹² Why then would I envision that Maimonides hesitates before proclaiming that the whole world will voluntarily convert to Judaism?

First, let me bring some textual support for the view that Maimonides does not think that the whole world will become Jewish. As Blidstein argues, if Maimonides felt that the whole world would in fact convert to Judaism, one would have expected a more explicit statement on the subject, some stress on this point. Moreover, Maimonides appears to see the world in the messianic times as maintaining its multi-national character. This would not be the case if everyone converted. Then everyone's nationality would be Jewish, at least according to what appears to be Maimonides' conception of nationality.¹³ There is then an

10 Ibid., 8.10.

11 This passage was censored from the early printed editions of the *Mishneh Torah* and still does not appear in many editions. Cf. Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* 4.23.

12 See *Guide* 2.39; cf. 1.63, 3.27.

13 See Blidstein, *Maimonides' Political Halakha*, 247. Maimonides' position is based on the view that the proselyte becomes a full-fledged Israelite who has completely abandoned his previous identity, in accordance with the rabbinic dictum: "The proselyte is like a newborn," and hence we pay no consideration to his past. See, for example, his commentary to Mishnah Zavim 2.3. In his letter to Obadiah the

ambiguity, if not an inconsistency, in Maimonides' view of the future.¹⁴ He must hesitate for a brief moment before unequivocally deciding the issue. I interpret him as secretly agreeing with the view that it would be sufficient for gentiles to become fellow travelers of the Jews by striving to perfect their intellects, each in accordance with one's ability, and pursuing ethical perfection, while at the same time giving his vocal assent to the view positing their formal conversion. This is intrinsically tied to his political thought.

It is well known that Maimonides in the *Guide of the Perplexed* makes an unusual move in proving the divinity of Judaism. Whereas in his earlier works he points to empirical proofs of its supernatural *origin*, namely the divine voice heard at Sinai proclaiming before all Israel the truth of Moses' prophecy,¹⁵ in the *Guide* he points to three different criteria as proof of its divinity: 1) the "equibalance" of its laws, particularly in its demands on limiting one's corporeal appetites (2.39);¹⁶ 2)

Proselyte, Maimonides reinforces the view of the complete integration of the proselyte into the Jewish people; see Isaac Shailat (ed. and Heb. trans.), *Iggerot HaRambam* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1987), 233-235. In the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, he underlines the fact that two of the leading rabbinic sages, R. Akiva and R. Meir, were children of converts, in order to show that the level one achieves within the Jewish community is dependent upon one's learning and not one's origin.

14 Maimonides' view of the messianic future has been the subject of a good number of studies. For two different interpretations of his conception see in particular Amos Funkenstein, "Maimonides: Political Theory and Realistic Messianism," *Miscellanea Medieavalia* 9 (1977): 81-103; Aviezer Ravitzky, "'To the Utmost of Human Capacity': Maimonides on the Days of the Messiah," in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, ed. Joel Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 221-256 [reprinted in Ravitzky, *History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1996), 73-112]. An extensive bibliography dealing with this topic was compiled by Jacob Dienstag and can be found in *Eschatology in Maimonidean Thought: Messianism, Resurrection, and the World to Come*, ed. Jacob I. Dienstag (New York: Ktav, 1983), 242-271.

15 See, for example. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 8.1.

16 "For when a thing is as perfect as it is possible in a species, it is impossible that within that species there should be found another thing that does not fall short of that perfection, either because of excess or deficiency. Thus in comparison with a temperament whose composition is of the greatest equibalance possible in the species in question, all other temperaments are not composed in accordance with this equibalance because of either deficiency or excess. Things are similar with regard to this Law (*shari'a*), as is clear from its equibalance . . . for these are manners

the purpose of the Law, namely that it pays attention to the well-being of one's beliefs (2.40), ultimate perfection lying in one's knowledge rather than in one's deeds.¹⁷ Since legislations that imitate the divine law may also appear to share these two traits, Maimonides adds another criterion: 3) the intellectual-moral perfection of the prophet who brings the law (2.40). Only a perfect individual can receive prophecy in his view of this phenomenon.¹⁸ Maimonides is also adamant on the point that God does not miraculously bestow prophecy upon one who does not possess all the necessary natural qualifications (2.32). The *Guide* substitutes a rational—and, one is tempted to add, naturalistic—basis for recognizing the divinity of the divine law for the supernatural basis found in his earlier writings. There is no inherent

of which there is no burden or excess—such as monastic life and pilgrimage and similar things—nor a deficiency necessarily leading to greed and being engrossed in the indulgence of appetites, so that in consequence the perfection of man is diminished with respect to his moral habits and to his speculation—this being the case with regard to all the other nomoi of the religious communities of the past. . . . Accordingly the facility or difficulty of the Law (*sharī'a*) should not be estimated with reference to the passions of all the wicked, vile, morally corrupt men, but should be considered with reference to the man who is perfect among the people. For it is the aim of this Law that everyone should be such a man. Only that Law is called by us divine Law (*sharī'a ilāhīyā*), whereas the other political regimens (*al-tadbīrāt al-madaniyyāt*)—such as the nomoi of the Greeks and the ravings of the Sabians and of others—are due, as I have explained several times to the action of groups of rulers who were not prophets” (380-381).

- 17 “Accordingly if you find a Law (*sharī'a*) the whole end of which and the whole purpose of the chief thereof, who determined the actions required by it, are directed exclusively toward the ordering of the city and its circumstances and the abolition in it of injustice and oppression; and if in that Law attention is not at all directed toward speculative matters . . . you must know that that Law is a nomos. . . . If, on the other hand, you find a Law all of whose ordinances are due to attention being paid, as we stated before, to the soundness of the circumstances pertaining to the body and also to the soundness of belief—a Law that takes pains to inculcate correct opinions with regard to God, may He be exalted in the first place, and with regard to the angles, and that desires to make man wise, to give him understanding, and to awaken his attention, so that he should know the whole of that which exists in its true form—you must know that this guidance comes from Him, may He be exalted, and that this Law is divine (*al-sharī'a ilāhīyā*)” (383-384). See also *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.27; 3.54.
- 18 I analyze these chapters of the *Guide* in Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 257-263.

contradiction between these two approaches. Speaking philosophically, one may say that in his early writings Maimonides underlines the efficient cause of the divine law, while in his theological treatise he is more interested in stressing its final and formal causes.¹⁹ A number of interpreters, myself among them, have viewed this shift in approach not only as a tactical one, that is to say presenting the notion of divine law in a manner that will be more acceptable to rationalists, but rather as indicative of his esoteric position on the origin of divine law. The Torah does not result from God directly creating audible words to convey specific commandments to Moses' hearing, as R. Saadiah Gaon maintains,²⁰ nor does it result from the impressing of specific laws on the mind of Moses, an internal "voice" conveying the laws.²¹ Rather it is the immediate product of Moses' intellectual perfection, a perfection that involves a purely intellectual and perfect understanding of the order of existence, and Moses' ability to frame a perfect Law on the basis of his theoretical understanding.²²

Maimonides takes for his model Alfarabi's depiction in the *Political Regime* of the ideal lawgiver:

The supreme ruler without qualification is he who does not need anyone to rule him in anything whatever, but has actually acquired the sciences and every kind of knowledge, and has no need of a man to guide him in anything. He is able to comprehend well each one of the particular things that he ought to do. He is able to guide well all others to everything in which he instructs them, to employ all those who do any of the acts for which they are equipped, and to determine, define, and direct these acts toward happiness. This is found only in the one who possesses great and superior natural dispositions, when his soul is in union with the Active Intellect. . . . This

19 In both his legal treatises and in the *Guide* he stresses unique perfection of the agent of transmission, Moses.

20 For the notion of created speech see *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 2.12. For a discussion of this phenomenon see Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea*, 56-68.

21 I will discuss this point in more detail below in chapter 9.

22 See Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 12-13, 79-81. See also Alvin Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy," *HUCA* 40 (1969): 325-362; and Kalman Bland, "Moses and the Law According to Maimonides," in *Mystics, Philosophers and Politicians*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetschinski (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982), 49-66.

man is the true prince according to the ancients; he is the one of whom it ought to be said that he receives revelation (*wahy*).²³

If Maimonides finds his inspiration from Alfarabi's model, he also finds in it a challenge to the permanent validity of Judaism. Certainly the vast majority of individuals would consider such a law to be a human product. For Alfarabi, followed by Maimonides, the legislator solves this problem by creating myths indicating the Deity's personal involvement in the transmission of each of the laws. This should satisfy the masses as to the divine origin of the Law and insure their commitment.²⁴

Yet there remains another problem that is more substantive from a philosophic perspective. Alfarabi depicts ideal legislators and polities only in theoretical terms, without dealing explicitly with Islam. His theoretical model enables him to posit successive ideal legislations stemming from more than a single ideal lawgiver. Each lawgiver frames a legislation fitting to one's own time and place. In the periods between the emerging of ideal lawgivers, subordinate lawgivers assume the task of adapting the existing legislation to changing circumstances.²⁵ There is nothing in the model itself that suggests that one lawgiver will be the

23 The passage was translated by F. M. Najjar and appears in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 36. It should be noted that Alfarabi in his various writings does not use the term "divine religion" but "virtuous (*faḍīla*) religion." See in particular his *Book of Religion*, in *Alfarabi: The Political Writings*, trans. Charles E. Butterworth (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 93-98.

24 For a study of Alfarabi's political thought, see Miriam Galston, *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990). The importance of the prophet teaching by means of images of the truth and laying down activities that are designed to preserve the people's commitment to the law is elaborated by Avicenna; see the selection from *Al-Shifā: Al-Ilāhiyyāt* translated by Michael Marmura that appears in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 100-101. Maimonides' indebtedness to Alfarabi's political philosophy has been much discussed in scholarly literature, following the classic studies of Leo Strauss on this issue, such as his "Farabi's Plato," in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, ed. Alexander Marx et al. (New York: American Academy of Jewish Research, 1945), 357-393. See, for example, Lawrence Berman, "Maimonides, the Disciple of Alfarabi," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 154-178.

25 See *Political Regime*, 37.

seal of all prophets and lawgivers, as Moslems regard Mohammed. Quite the contrary, the model suggests that as long as there are historical changes there is room for new divine legislations. Maimonides leaves little doubt that he sees some of the laws outmoded, namely those involving sacrifices that are laid down in accordance with the “second intention” of the law as he terms it—that is, they do not lead to perfection directly but are promulgated as a compromise measure out of consideration to historical circumstances.²⁶ He nevertheless is adamant on the issue that there never was or will be another divine legislation.²⁷ Given the historical context in which all laws are framed, it will do little good to argue that theoretically speaking, even if any prophet attained Moses’ perfection he would not lay down a new law, insofar as the law, like nature, is completely perfect, and any change, either addition or deletion, would detract from its perfection.²⁸ This argument ignores the fact recognized by Alfarabi that changes in historical circumstances would call for framing a different divine law. Once Sabian practices are largely obliterated, it appears to be pointless to continue to uphold a divine law that is devoted in such large measure to countering them. New threats to ethical monotheism should be given more consideration. Maimonides himself appears to recognize that a superior divine law is possible. While explaining why God commanded sacrifices despite the fact that they do not belong to the primary intention of the law—that is, they do not contribute to perfection in a direct manner—he states:

His wisdom, may He be exalted, and His gracious ruse, which is manifest in regard to all His creatures, did not require that He give us a Law prescribing the rejection, abandonment, and abolition of all these kinds of worship. For one could not then conceive the acceptance of [such a Law], considering the nature of man, which always likes that to which it is accustomed. At that time this would have

26 *Guide* 3.32.

27 *Ibid.* 2.39; 3.27. See also the ninth principle of Judaism that Maimonides presents at the end of his introduction to *Pereq Heleq* in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*; and *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 9.1.

28 See above, note 16. Maimonides makes a similar point when discussing miracles and permanent changes in nature in *Guide* 2.28.

been similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times who, calling upon the people to worship God, would say: “God has given you a Law forbidding you to pray to Him, to fast, to call upon Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist solely in meditation without any works at all.” (*Guide* 3.32: 526)

How then are we to understand the paradox that Maimonides, one of the more historically inclined thinkers regarding the reason for many of the commandments of Mosaic Law, adopts what appears to be a completely ahistorical position when it comes to its eternal validity?

The answer lies in Maimonides’ commitment to Judaism. Maimonides never looks at Judaism as an outsider. The way he approaches this issue is how can one best understand, defend, and promote the Torah as a divine legislation in his own period in a manner that at the same time conforms to his understanding of the nature of divine activity. While Maimonides may actually have thought that he could dismiss the divine character of Christianity and Islam on philosophical grounds by pointing to the defects in the content of the religions and in those who were responsible for laying them down,²⁹ he certainly had no strong rational argument to eliminate the *possibility* that there will emerge a prophet equaling Moses’ perfection, who would lay down a new divine law. Such argument can only be based on traditional grounds or political ones. It certainly is not a demonstrative claim from a philosophic perspective. There are traditional statements that Maimonides employs in support of this position,³⁰ but I regard the political considerations as

29 Maimonides devotes much of his *Epistle to the Jews of Yemen* to this objective. He also hints to Mohammed’s unfitness as a prophet in *Guide* 2.40. As for Christianity, belief in the Trinity and of God assuming a human form made it an easy target for the polemics of Moslems and Jews alike who accepted the philosophic doctrine of a single incorporeal deity. For a study of anti-Christian philosophical polemics, see Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York: Ktav, 1977).

30 In addition to attempting to prove this point on the basis of biblical verses, Maimonides also cites rabbinic statements—for example, prophets are not allowed to introduce any innovation in the Law after its reception; see BT Shabbat 104a. Prior to Maimonides, R. Saadiah Gaon already argued at length against the abrogation of the Torah, employing both rational considerations and biblical textual ones; see *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 3.7-10.

more important. He is writing in a period during which three revelatory religions are vying for supremacy (leaving aside Eastern religions), and from a historical perspective Judaism is in last place.³¹ To concede even the possibility of changes in Judaism in the future is to weaken one's defense against the view that these changes have already occurred in the past, namely by the founders of the other religions. This would make it easier to undermine the commitment of Jews in the present to their ancestral religion.³²

Maimonides at times was faced with the necessity of addressing the contemporary situation directly in an effort to prevent Jews from converting. The arguments he makes in the *Guide* for identifying the characteristics of the divine religion previously appeared in his *Epistle to the Jews of Yemen*, in which he deals with Christianity and Islam explicitly. Taking a page from Halevi, Maimonides views these religions as poor, lifeless imitations of the "divine religion" (*din ʿallāh*) and

31 This problem is the starting point for Halevi's *Kuzari*. If might does not make right, it at least is reflective of right, or of God's favor, in the minds of the populace.

32 Maimonides writes in *Guide* 3.34: 534-535: "In view of this consideration, it also will not be possible that the laws be dependent on changes in the circumstances of the individuals and of the times, as is the case with regard to medical treatment, which is particularized for every individual in conformity with his present temperament. On the contrary, governance of the Law ought to be absolute and universal, including everyone, even if it is suitable only for certain individuals and not suitable for others; for if it were made to fit individuals, the whole would be corrupted." While the problem of abrogation is not discussed in this passage, Maimonides' view suggests that allowing for even the slightest change in the Torah would lead to undermining the entire legislation. He is adamant in his insistence that one should view the Law of Moses as an immutable whole, a point that is underscored by his codification of all the Mosaic commandments in his *Mishneh Torah*, including those concerning the service of the Temple that were not relevant to his own period. This point is also reflected in the extreme stance he adopts in distancing prophecy from any legislative/judicial role. I discuss this issue in greater detail in "Maimonides' Political Philosophy," in *Cambridge Companion to Moses Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 204-206. See also Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea*, 159-167, 198-200; Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 23-29; Gerald Blidstein, "On the Institutionalization of Prophecy in Maimonidean Halakha," *Daat* 43 (1999): 25-42 (Heb.).

the “true religion” (*al-din al-ḥaqīqī*).³³ The constant repetition of these terms in this context serves to counter the claims of the competing religions and stress Judaism’s exclusivity.

If Maimonides posits Mosaic Law as the one eternal divine religion, he is not being insensitive to the relation between divine law and historical realities, but he is rather being very sensitive to his current reality that requires a vigorous defense of Judaism. On a practical level, changes in historical realities are to be met by the various powers bestowed by Mosaic Law upon the rabbinic authorities in every generation, who assume the task Alfarabi ascribes to the subordinate lawgivers who adapt the divine Law to their own period. For Maimonides, the only way to preserve the whole is to deny any formal change in any of its parts. Mosaic Law in fact continuously evolves due to the activity of the legal institutions responsible for its interpretation and the various powers accorded them, while no commandment is ever formally abrogated. Maimonides essentially adopts the model of the virtuous religion that he found in the writings of Alfarabi in order to understand, defend, and adapt Jewish law to his own time in accordance with his view of the factors that make a law divine—namely, its purpose and the way it goes about attaining it.³⁴ In an exceptionally innovative and highly significant move, Maimonides opens his great legal code, *Mishneh Torah*, with two sections that are devoted to bringing about the “welfare of the soul,” that is, correct opinions concerning God and the world, and the “welfare of the body,” that is, ethical traits. These are the two purposes of the divine law presented by Maimonides in *Guide* 3.27.

Maimonides’ response to historical circumstances finds expression in yet another interesting way in a context in which he deals with the divine law. In the “Laws of Kings,” Maimonides essentially transforms

33 See Shailat, *Iggerot HaRambam*, 86-87 (Heb., 121-123). Maimonides also employs there (87) the term “the true divine religion” (*al-sbarīca al-ilāhīyā al-ḥaqīqī*). See Halevi, *Kuzari* 3.9; see also Daniel J. Lasker, “Proselyte Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in the Thought of Judah Halevi,” *JQR* 81 (1990): 75-91.

34 See Warren Z. Harvey, “Political Philosophy and Halakhah in Maimonides,” *Iyyun* 29 (1980): 198-212 (Heb.); see also Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 21ff.

optional wars waged by a Jewish sovereign into holy wars by making it the duty of the sovereign to insure that all the vanquished adopt the seven Noahite laws.³⁵ This transformation can be seen also in the terminology he employs in “Laws of Kings” 7.15 when dealing with the desired mindset of the soldiers marching off to an optional war: “He should know that he is waging war in order to unify God.” As early as the *Book of Commandments* (positive commandment no. 191), where Maimonides deals with the anointed priest who addresses the troops before marching off to battle, this point clearly emerges: “He should add to this words that stir up the nation for war and bring them to sacrifice their lives for the victory of the divine religion (*din ʿallāh*) and revenge upon those ignorant of it who corrupt the order of society.” “Divine religion” in this context does not appear to refer to the Noahite laws but to the Mosaic Law that commands their enforcement. This also is the purport of his statement in “Laws of Kings” 4.10: “In every matter, his [the king’s] acts should be for the sake of heaven, and his thought and intention to elevate the true religion (*dat ha-emet*) and to fill the world with justice.” One need not go far to find the primary sources for Maimonides’ position and terminology when dealing with war—namely, the same Islam against which Maimonides polemicizes.³⁶ While Judaism may be powerless at the current stage of history to engage in *jihād* or Crusades, Maimonides develops a model based on traditional sources that is designed to address the aspirations of his coreligionists at the same time that he attempts to mold their aspirations (and their historical memory) in response to the views and practices of the other religions.

35 See Ralph Lerner, “Moses Maimonides,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), 181-200; Blidstein, *Political Concepts in Maimonidean Halakha*, 230-245.

36 This point is also true of Maimonides’ decision to formulate principles of faith, his role model being the fanatical Almohades, who were the cause of so much suffering experienced by Andalusian Jewry including Maimonides and his family. See Shlomo Pines, “Lecture on Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Iyyun* 47 (1998): 115-128 (Heb.). The article was prepared from Pines’s manuscript by Sarah Stroumsa and Warren Z. Harvey.

In his treatment of the Noahite laws in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 8.11, Maimonides introduces a very controversial point that has important bearing on our topic as well as on his philosophy in general. He insists that gentiles observe these laws based on an acceptance of the revelation of the Torah and not because of an “inclination of the intellect” (*hekbre’a ha-da’at*). Without this acceptance, one is not considered to be a righteous gentile (who merits a portion in the World to Come) and one who wishes to live in Israel would be denied the status of a resident alien. One who observes these laws due to an inclination of the intellect is labeled by Maimonides a sage, at least in accordance with the preferred reading (from a textual and philosophic standpoint) of the passage in question.³⁷ Maimonides deliberately leaves ambiguous the status of this individual and whether he attains a share in the World to Come.³⁸ By adding the clause that Noahites must follow the laws based on an acceptance of the revelation to Moses, Maimonides achieves two objectives: 1) belief in one God, who is a God of revelation (note that without this clause an atheist might have no problem in fulfilling the demands of the Noahite laws); 2) a more solid foundation for morality than the popular conceptions of the masses and perhaps even the conceptions of the philosophers—a point on which Leo Strauss devoted so much of his thought.³⁹

37 Instead of reading “is not a resident alien and not a philosopher,” one should read “. . . but a philosopher,” substituting the letter aleph for the letter vav, followed by the letters lamed aleph (*ela* instead of *ve-lo*). While the older standard printed editions read the word with vav, the better manuscripts and most of the newer editions read it with aleph. The subsequent furor this position stirred up, particularly after Spinoza’s famous critique of Maimonides at the end of the fifth chapter of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, is well known. Scholars continue to argue the basis for Maimonides’ ruling and even its very meaning, particularly given the controversy over the correct textual reading. For a study of this issue see Steven S. Schwarzschild, “Do Noahites Have to Believe in Revelation?” *JQR* 52 (1962): 297-365 [reprinted in Schwarzschild, *The Pursuit of the Ideal*, ed. M. Kellner (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), 29-60].

38 See Michael Nehorai, “How a Righteous Gentile can Merit the World to Come,” *Tarbiz* 61 (1992): 31-82 (Heb.); Hannah Kasher, “The Torah as a Means of Achieving the World to Come,” *Tarbiz* 64 (1995): 301-306 (Heb.). See also Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 65-71. For a possible reason for this ambiguity, see below.

39 See in particular Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” *PAAJR* 13 (1943): 47-96 [reprinted in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988): 95-141].

Presumably, in messianic times the gentiles, having already becoming righteous because of their acceptance of the belief in the revelation to Moses, and not solely because of their understanding of the wisdom of the Noahite laws, will take the final step and become full converts.

Yet my interpretation of Maimonides' view of messianic times is not without its problems when considered in light of other statements of his on the subject. Maimonides' depiction of the ideal future in *Guide* 3.11 appears to suggest a different conclusion:

These great evils that come about between the human individuals who inflict them upon one another because of purposes, desires, opinion, and beliefs, are all of them likewise consequent upon privation. For all of them derive from ignorance, I mean from a privation of knowledge. . . . If there were knowledge, whose relation to the human form is like that of the faculty of sight to the eye, they would refrain from doing any harm to themselves and to others. For through the cognizance of the truth, enmity and hatred are removed and the inflicting of harm by people on one another is abolished. . . . Then it gives the reason for this, saying that the cause of the abolition of these enmities, these discords, and these tyrannies, will be the knowledge that men will then have concerning the true reality of the deity, for it says: *They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea* [Isaiah 11:9]. Know this. (440-441)

The knowledge to which Maimonides refers is not necessarily attained only by way of the divine Law. There is nothing in the context of the discussion to suggest this conclusion. The reference here is to the knowledge of God, of the purpose of human existence and of morality that is possessed also by the philosophers. The Law is not an end in itself but ultimately serves as a means to the end of true knowledge—a point that Maimonides makes explicit in *Guide* 3.27. The role Maimonides ascribes to the true religion in promoting true knowledge explains some of his more radical moves as a legal authority, particularly in dogmatizing belief in an incorporeal deity. He repeatedly alludes to the view that intellectual perfection, and not Jewish

observance *per se*, is the basis for attaining immortality.⁴⁰ Because of the connection between religion and knowledge, While Maimonides normally uses “true religion” to designate Mosaic Law, in his response to Obadiah the Proselyte the term is used to indicate true beliefs: “Abraham our father taught all the people, educated them, and informed them the true religion (*dat ha-emet*) and the unity of God.”⁴¹ For this reason too, the most important distinguishing feature of Maimonides’ messianic future is the pursuit of knowledge of God, with all other features serving as a means to this activity. In short, the ideal social and material conditions in messianic times will enable one to engage more fully in the fulfillment of the Torah, which in turn leads to striving to attain knowledge of God to the utmost of one’s capacity.⁴² Yet given the superiority of knowledge over deed, the role of Mosaic Law in attaining perfection is at the same time an ambiguous one. It is concerned primarily with deeds on one hand, and it provides little of the philosophic-scientific knowledge, at least in an explicit manner, that constitutes intellectual perfection, on the other.⁴³ For this reason there is a significant gap between divine law and ultimate knowledge, which Maimonides’ depiction of the messianic future in the “Laws of Kings” does not entirely bridge.

In the final analysis, Maimonides’ stress on belief in the revelation to Moses in “Laws of Kings” is due to the consideration that this belief is necessary for all of the world’s masses, for they, due to their limited

40 See, for example, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 4.9; *Guide* 3.8; 3.51. For a study of this issue see Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” in *Von der Mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklaerung* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1987), 85-91. See also Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 141-149.

41 Yehoshua Blau (ed. and Heb. trans.), *R. Moses b. Maimon: Responsa* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1960), 549. Cf. Shailat, *Iggerot HaRambam*, 233, where the alternate reading “way of truth (*derekh ha-emet*)” is brought. *Derekh ha-emet* occurs in other passages in Maimonides’ writings to indicate the holding of true beliefs. See, for example, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1.3. Maimonides’ usage of *dat ha-emet* in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Leavened and Unleavened Bread 7.4, is ambiguous; while it may refer to Mosaic Law it may also refer to the attainment of true beliefs.

42 See *Introduction to Pereq Heleq; Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 9.1-2.

43 I deal with this issue in more detail in *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 189-223.

intellect, will always require belief in the divine Law to insure their acceptance of the monotheistic idea and the practice of morality, even in messianic times. Maimonides is not so utopian as to believe that everyone will become philosophers. Thus in messianic times there will be no more crime, because everyone will possess the knowledge necessary for its prevention by one means or another—the masses by way of belief in revelation and the philosophers by way of intellectual understanding. At the same time, the philosophers will realize that the divine Law presents these same truths in a manner appropriate to the masses. Those who achieve true knowledge of philosophy understand God and strive for human perfection independent of the mandates of the Law. In their case, the belief in the revelation of the Law or even a formal conversion to Judaism would not appear to add to their perfection. However, they will always remain few, even in messianic times, and the Law is aimed at the majority.⁴⁴

This brings us to the problem of where the gentile sage stands in relation to perfection in comparison to an observant Jew in Maimonides' thought. We have seen above that Maimonides is ambiguous in his definition of the status of this individual. There is little doubt that Maimonides as a philosopher must answer that such an individual stands on a much higher plane than the observant Jew who is ignorant of all philosophy and science. Moreover, if immortality of the intellect, which is how Maimonides defines the World to Come, is consequent on intellectual perfection, it is the philosophical elite, irrespective of their religion, who attain this state, and not the masses of Jews. Yet Maimonides as a rabbinic scholar cannot indicate the superiority of the former, at least not explicitly, for to do so would undermine much of his activity in bolstering the edifice of Jewish law.

44 *Guide* 3.34. It may further be argued that even if Maimonides accepted the theoretical possibility of framing a better divine Law in the future, there will be no real need to do so, just as there is no need in Maimonides' own time. The need then as now is to interpret Mosaic Law in a manner that is most conducive to the pursuit of true knowledge of God and best insures social morality, including the curbing of one's physical passions.

The superiority of knowledge over deed in Maimonides' thought, and the deliberate ambiguity in his approach to the gentile philosopher, finds expression also in the most famous parable in *Guide* 3.51—that of the king in his palace.⁴⁵ The reader is struck by how far the observant masses are from reaching the king in Maimonides' view; they do not even see the walls of the palace. Even more striking is the fact that he depicts the great Torah scholars who lack philosophic knowledge as still looking for the entrance to the palace. The importance of philosophic-scientific knowledge in attaining perfection receives a vivid expression in Maimonides' explanation of the parable. This is particularly true in the second explanation Maimonides provides for the parable, in which proximity to the king is depicted in terms of mastering the various sciences in their proper order.⁴⁶ A closer examination of Maimonides' explanation of the parable reveals that his omission is no less striking. For all of his stress on philosophic knowledge in his explanation of how to reach the king, and the not so subtle downplaying of the role of all the commandments in this matter, at least those involving physical actions, one person or group is conspicuous by their absence—namely, Aristotle and his followers. Where does the “head of the philosophers,” as Maimonides calls Aristotle,⁴⁷ stand in relation to the king?

45 For a detailed study of this parable, see Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides on Human Perfection* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990); and Hannah Kasher, “The Parable of the King’s Palace in *The Guide of the Perplexed* as a Directive to the Student,” *AJS Review* 14 (1989): 1-19 [Hebrew Section]. I discuss this parable also below in the introduction to chapter 4, 73-77.

46 In the first explanation of the parable, the ones who are near the walls of the palace but are looking for the gate are “the jurists who believe true opinions on the basis of traditional authority and study the law concerning the practices of divine service, but do not engage in speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion and make no inquiry whatever regarding the rectification of belief” (619). Those who have plunged into speculation have entered the antechambers. In the second explanation of the parable, Maimonides indicates that those who have not progressed beyond the study of logic and the mathematical sciences are still searching for the gate, while those who understand the natural sciences have entered the antechambers. Maimonides suggests that the second explanation complements the first. The question arises whether he sees it as an alternative to the first.

47 *Guide* 1.5; 2.23.

It is an untenable interpretation, in my view, to hold that Maimonides sees Aristotle as belonging to the group that “have turned their backs upon the ruler’s habitation,” whom he defines as “people who have opinions and engaged in speculation, but who have adopted incorrect opinions either because of some great error that befell them in the course of their speculation. . . . Accordingly, because of this opinion, the more these people walk, the greater is their distance from the ruler’s habitation. And they are far worse than the first. They are those concerning whom necessity at certain times impels killing them and blotting out the traces of their opinions lest they should lead astray the ways of others” (619). Maimonides is referring to polytheists and atheists in his description of this group, for they have committed the greatest error of all in the opinions they hold.⁴⁸ For Maimonides, Aristotle is the great monotheistic philosopher, the one who provides philosophical proofs against Epicurus and shows the general providence God exercises toward the world.⁴⁹ He certainly should not be classed together with that ignoble philosopher. Nowhere does Maimonides speak of Aristotle with less than complete respect, even in those places where he apparently disagrees with him. It is Aristotle’s writings, together with those of his most important commentators, that Maimonides indicates to the translator of the *Guide*, R. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, that he must read in order to understand the treatise.⁵⁰ Aristotle, whose work on metaphysics, let alone other sciences, remained for Maimonides the most important treatise ever written on the subject and indispensable to the pursuit of intellectual perfection, clearly deserves a place close to the prophets in his thought, and hardly should be seen as belonging to the group that he condemns more than all others. The reason for Maimonides’ striking omission is clear. To indicate explicitly how close Aristotle stands in relation to the king would undermine

48 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and Wars 6.4, in which Maimonides rules that the Canaanites and Amaleqites are killed only if they do not accept the Noahite laws. For Maimonides, it is people’s beliefs that are the most important consideration in determining their status.

49 *Guide* 3.17.

50 Shailat, *Letters and Essays of Moses Maimonides*, 552.

Judaism, for it would lead many to conclude that Judaism is not indispensable, and perhaps not even the superior path to perfection. Silence in this case is the better part of valor. Here, as in the case of his depiction of the messianic future, Maimonides walks a thin line between teaching the central role of philosophic knowledge in Judaism while trying to keep his readers from concluding that Judaism is not necessary for reaching ultimate perfection. Maimonides, like nature and the Law, cannot pay attention to the isolated in addressing his coreligionists. He is not writing for the exceptional philosopher who has attained perfection, but for the masses of Jews and the few potentially perfect, and he is interested in guiding them to perfection by way of Judaism.

One's vision of the future, just as one's reconstruction of the past, at least when you are talking about leaders and public educators, is always about the present. It is about how one sees the current situation and to what destination one seeks to guide the audience in their present circumstances. Maimonides' depiction of messianic times is not an exercise in divination, is not based on what he sees as an inevitable natural process operating in history,⁵¹ nor on a simple reconstruction of traditional statements on the subject. One may even question to what extent he is concerned with what will actually happen sometime in the indefinite future. His code of Jewish law is for his time and not necessarily for all time.⁵² He is concerned with what is happening to the Jewish people in the present, and how the situation is to be improved: how Jews in their current circumstances can best be guided to realize the true goal in life as human beings, how Jewish law can best be interpreted and implemented to achieve this goal, and how the past and the

51 Interestingly, R. Nissim of Marseille, in his discussion of Maimonides' principles, does view the coming of the messiah as an inevitable event from a philosophic standpoint. He bases this position on the Aristotelian principle that what is possible must inevitably occur in the course of eternity. See *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 156.

52 That is to say, according to my view of Maimonides' historical consciousness and his playing the role that Alfarabi ascribes to subordinate lawgivers, he accepts the fact that others like him will arise in the future who will play a similar role and write codes based on their interpretations and in accordance with the circumstances of their period, while maintaining the inviolability of the Mosaic commandments.

future can be reconstructed to best teach this goal. He includes all the commandments in his code, and not only those practiced in his period, not because he sees his code as the one that will govern the future Sanhedrin, but because it is crucial that Jews in his own time view the Torah as a complete and single body of law that is inviolate, in order to meet the contemporary challenges.

Therefore, I think Maimonides would hesitate for a brief moment while considering all these points before answering what he must answer when confronted with the issue of whether all gentiles would become Jews in the messianic future. His uppermost consideration would be a political-pedagogical one: what will be the repercussions of his answer for Jews in his own time? What conclusions will they draw if he paints a picture of an ideal future in which all pursue the same goal but in different ways, not bound by uniform obligations? While the distinction between Jews and other nations in the messianic future may be important for reinforcing a sense of Jewish peoplehood, does it add to an appreciation of the role of Mosaic Law in attaining perfection or detract from it? In the final analysis, all answers about the future must serve to bolster the commitment of the Jewish people to Judaism in the present, at the same time that they contribute to appreciating the true nature of Judaism as a divine religion.



Maimonides on the Eternity of the World

Introduction¹

Maimonides' stance on the creation of the world has attracted considerable debate over the centuries. Those who arrived at the conclusion that Maimonides maintains an essentially Aristotelian picture of divine governance of the world, and presents an esoteric position on all the theological issues in which God is regarded as playing a personal role in human affairs, could hardly take Maimonides' defense of creation at

1 This article has its origins in a symposium that took place at the 2008 conference of the Association of Jewish Studies, and first appeared in *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives*, ed. Raphael Jospe and Dov Schwartz (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 157-184. In this volume appear also an article by Kenneth Seeskin, seeking to strengthen his interpretation of Maimonides as believing in creation, together with responses to both articles on the part of Roslyn Weiss and Charles H. Manekin. In spite of the points of critique against my article on the part of both respondents (from two entirely different directions, though Roslyn Weiss shares my basic conclusion), I decided to retain the original form, aside for some minor additions and changes, without responding to the critiques. One is strongly urged to read all the articles in the volume cited above.

face value.² Though I belong to the camp of those who adopt an esoteric reading of Maimonides and maintain that he attempted to understand Judaism in light of Aristotelian thought—and did not seek to develop a position that took a middle course between the personal God of tradition and the impersonal God of philosophy—I confess that it is hard to read Maimonides’ account of creation without feeling that he really means it. Why else would he go to such pains to defend this doctrine philosophically as well as on religious grounds? Moreover, Maimonides does not simply go through the motions of proving creation, but displays a great deal of philosophic ingenuity, and develops some solid philosophic arguments that improve upon those found in his sources, while still not abandoning the principles of Aristotelian physics to which he is committed. This is hardly the move we would expect of someone hinting at an esoteric position. The presentation of standard

2 The most important modern exponent of the esoteric reading of Maimonides is Leo Strauss; see his classic study “The Literary Character of *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” in *Essays on Maimonides*, ed. Salo Baron (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 37-91 [reprinted in Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1952), 38-94]. For a survey of esoteric vs. exoteric readings of Maimonides’ thought, see in particular Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Secrets of the Guide of the Perplexed: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries,” in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 159-207. See also Howard Kreisel, “Moses Maimonides,” in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1997), 245-280. For some recent studies of Maimonides’ esotericism, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996) (Heb.); Yair Loberbaum, “On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics and Esotericism in Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Metaphysics* 55 (2002): 711-750; Aviezer Ravitzky, “Maimonides: Esotericism and Philosophical Education,” *Daat* 53 (2004): 43-62 (Heb.). For a study of this issue in medieval Jewish philosophy in general, see Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2007); Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002) (Heb.). It should be noted that even among those scholars who favor an esoteric reading of Maimonides, not all of them agree that his motive was essentially political—that is to say, to hide certain truths from the masses. See also Warren Z. Harvey, “How Leo Strauss Paralyzed the Study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* in the 20th Century,” *Iyyun* 50 (2001): 387-396 (Heb.). For a strident attack against the esoteric reading of Maimonides in general, see Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 387-402.

but weak philosophic arguments to rebut the stronger arguments of your opponent is indeed a possible way of subtly alluding to an esoteric position.³ However, that a strong philosophic argument should be interpreted as not seriously held by its author—such an interpretation appears to be the product of perverse thinking.

It is easy to see the motivation of some of the medieval interpreters in making such a move, such as Joseph Ibn Kaspi and Moses Narboni, who suggest that Maimonides in fact believed in the eternity of the world and develop an esoteric reading of his statements on this issue.⁴ The doctrine of eternity was philosophically more respectable, and in this manner they tried to show how Maimonides was in basic agreement with the Aristotelian position, as they themselves apparently were. The modern interpreter is no longer burdened with this consideration; the opposite is the case. Maimonides' belief in creation, even creation *ex nihilo*, is more in keeping with contemporary science. Thus his stated position on this issue is the one that those interested in interpreting tradition in light of science should take pains to defend.

Nevertheless, I would like to advance the claim that despite all the considerable evidence to the contrary—much of it brought in painstaking detail by Kenneth Seeskin in his recent book, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*⁵—Maimonides in fact secretly favored the belief in the eternity *a parte ante* of the world.⁶ The primary path I will adopt in arguing that Maimonides in essence accepts the position that he vociferously argues against is the textual one—a path long favored by

3 See Leo Strauss's masterful discussion of methods for conveying secret teachings that oppose the prevailing orthodoxy in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, 22-37.

4 See Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *Maskiyot Kesef*, ed. Solomon Werblunger (Frankfurt A.M., 1848), 99-101; Moses Narboni, *Be'ur le-Sefer Moreh Nevukhim*, ed. Jacob Goldenthal (Vienna, 1852), 23b, 34a-b, 52a [both commentaries are reprinted in *Sheloshab Qadmonei Mefarshei Ha-Moreh* (Jerusalem, 1961)].

5 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

6 I am not claiming that Maimonides was absolutely convinced of this position and that he thought that the philosophers had in fact presented a demonstrative argument proving eternity. I am prepared to grant that Maimonides continued to entertain doubts on this issue. My claim is that he felt that the eternity of the world was the preferable position from a philosophic standpoint and was in all likelihood the esoteric position of Jewish tradition.

the esotericists and most in keeping with Maimonides' remarks in the introduction to his treatise.⁷ Comments Maimonides makes in passing often do not belong to the thrust of his argument in the context in which they appear and in fact clarify his opinion on issues he discusses elsewhere. Moreover, a close look at some of his comments reveals that they in fact undermine the gist of his argument and support the position he purportedly rejects. There is a midrashic quality to such reading—looking for the textual irregularities in the Maimonidean text and then offering an interpretation that seems to fly in the face of what the text literally states, or that reads much between the lines.⁸ While each of these readings taken individually are open to refutation, together they seem to support the view that there is an esoteric subtext to Maimonides' treatise, which extends also to the issue of creation.

The Esotericist Reading of Maimonides' Philosophy

Let us for a moment review the gist of Maimonides' position in the *Guide* in regard to creation. According to Maimonides, the monotheistic idea is proven if one accepts either creation or the eternity of the world (*Guide* 1.71).⁹ God's unique existence is not the issue here. Nor

7 Maimonides writes: "If you wish to grasp the totality of what this Treatise contains, so that nothing of it will escape you, then you must connect its chapters one with another; and when reading a given chapter, your intention must be not only to understand the totality of the subject of that chapter, but also to grasp each word that occurs in it in the course of the speech, even if that word does not belong to the intention of the chapter. For the diction of this Treatise has not been chosen at haphazard, but with great exactness and exceeding precision, and with care to avoid failing to explain any obscure point. And nothing has been mentioned out of its place, save with a view of explaining some matter in its proper place" (15). All English translations are taken from the translation of Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963).

8 In other words, just as the midrash often focuses on the verbal "irregularities" in the biblical text, isolates them, and develops their meaning, frequently appealing to verses that deal with entirely different matters, so one must use this method in reading Maimonides. As shown in the previous note, Maimonides himself appears to counsel employing this method in reading his treatise.

9 Cf. *Guide* 2.1 (third proof of God's existence). One should add that for the masses, belief in creation better supports the belief in one God than does belief in eternity. The belief that the spheres existed from eternity easily leads to the belief that they are deities, the belief that according to Maimonides characterizes the ancient religion of the Sabians (*Guide* 3.29). This may have also served for Maimonides as an

is the order of nature the issue, for Maimonides accepts the order of nature in its Aristotelian form even if the world is created, while rejecting the Kalām's view on this matter (*Guide* 1.71-72; 2.3-12). One may further argue that Maimonides regards creation as providing a better foundation for accepting the order of nature as posited by Aristotle than does the doctrine of eternity. Maimonides equates the doctrine of eternity with the doctrine of necessity, and necessity cannot adequately explain the purposive functioning of the order of nature (*Guide* 2.19-22). Yet it is not that creation provides a better philosophical explanation for the existence of the order of nature that is the main point Maimonides argues; rather, he asserts that creation proves that God possesses volition that is not limited to the order of nature. Only by accepting the notion of divine volition can we have revelatory religion and all the theological doctrines associated with it (*Guide* 2.25). The God of Aristotle has no role to play in history, is not a lawgiver, does not choose prophets to send on missions, and cannot perform miracles. Nor does Aristotle's deity reward and punish individuals in accordance with their actions. The God of Aristotle is the deity of an eternally unchanging natural order. Even if creation provides a better explanation for the existence of this order than does eternity, one hardly needs creation to posit such an order; one needs creation to posit the exceptions to the order. As Julius Guttmann succinctly notes regarding Maimonides' doctrine of creation: "It relieves Maimonides of the necessity of interpreting the religious ideas of God's activity and his relationship to the world in terms of an immanent, teleological, and largely impersonal dynamism. He can now reinvest these ideas with their original meaning, though he makes only sparing and very cautious use of this possibility."¹⁰ As Maimonides himself phrases it in *Guide* 2.25: "Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible" (329).

important factor in upholding the doctrine of creation, even if he did privately accept it as true.

10 *Philosophies of Judaism*, trans. David Silverman (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 192.

Yet a close reading of the issues involved has led a number of interpreters of Maimonides' philosophy to conclude that he in fact interprets God's activity and His relationship to the world in terms of "an immanent, teleological, and largely impersonal dynamism." Maimonides treats prophecy as a natural phenomenon, with the caveat that God can miraculously withhold prophecy from one who is worthy to attain it. At the same time, he invalidates his own examples for the miraculous withholding of prophecy, viewing such a miracle as only a theoretical possibility that never materialized and apparently never will. In this manner he signals his essential agreement with the Aristotelian position (*Guide* 2.32).¹¹ Only Mosaic prophecy and the Revelation at Sinai continue to be treated by him as supernatural phenomena, as in his earlier writings. However, in this case too there are passages in the *Guide* that can be interpreted as alluding to an esoteric position, which views Moses as the immediate author of the Law on the basis of the prophetic illumination he attained, and understands the Revelation at Sinai in a naturalistic manner.¹² Maimonides scatters certain hints in his writings that God did not in fact personally inform Moses of each

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- 11 For a discussion of Maimonides' three opinions concerning prophecy and the ramifications of his view of prophecy regarding the problem of creation, see Lawrence Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Miraculous Element in Prophecy," *HTR* 70 (1977): 233-256; Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides' Secret Position on Creation," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 16-40. Warren Z. Harvey, "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle," *HTR* 74 (1981): 287-301; Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 222-230; Roslyn Weiss, "Natural Order or Divine Will: Maimonides on Cosmogony and Prophecy," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 15 (2007): 1-26.
- 12 See Alvin Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy," *HUCA* 40 (1969): 325-362; Kalman Bland, "Moses and the Law According to Maimonides," in *Mystics, Philosophers and Politicians*, ed. Jehuda Reinharz and Daniel Swetschinski (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982), 49-66. See also Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 230-239, 260-262. Even some of the medieval philosophers, such as Nissim of Marseille, understood these phenomena in a naturalistic manner and maintained that Moses was the immediate author of the Law. For a discussion of this issue see chapter 6, 171-173; see also chapter 9.

commandment word for word by means of an audible voice, nor was such a voice miraculously created by God for Israel's benefit at Sinai.¹³

When one turns to Maimonides' discussion of providence, an esoteric position, in essential agreement with Aristotle, is presented in a manner that borders upon the exoteric. Maimonides begins his discussion by indicating that according to the opinion of the Law, human beings possess free will and everything that befalls them, good and bad—whether a person is hurt by a thorn or receives even the slightest pleasure—is determined according to their just deserts (*Guide* 3.17). After presenting the view that posits personal divine intervention in all matters that befall human beings, he immediately modifies his view to indicate that individual providence, now treated as only the protection humans experience and not the calamities that befall them, is in proportion to the perfection of the intellect, while everything else that happens to them is by chance, as is the case with the other species (*Guide* 3.18). Maimonides leads us step by step to the conclusion that the intellect itself is the mode of providence given to human beings, since it allows the individual to anticipate most evils and to take action to avoid them. It also directs the individual to lead a lifestyle that minimizes the physical evils normally befalling human beings. Finally, the perfect individual has attained an identity of pure intellect, in whose case all physical evils that befall the corporeal aspect of his being no longer affect him.¹⁴ The fact that Maimonides in his commentary on Job distinguishes Elihu's opinion, ostensibly representing Maimonides' own, and the opinion of

13 See Howard Kreisel, "The Voice of God in Medieval Jewish Philosophic Exegesis," *Daat* 16 (1986): 29-38 (Heb.). See also Jacob Levinger, *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989), 39-48 (Heb.). I discuss this issue in more detail below, chapter 9, 342-348.

14 A number of scholars have convincingly argued this reading of Maimonides. See, for example, Alvin Reines, "Maimonides' Concepts of Providence and Theodicy," *HUCA* 43 (1972): 169-206; Charles Touati, "Les deux théories de Maïmonide sur la providence," in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History*, ed. Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe (Alabama: Alabama University Press, 1979), 331-344. This position was advanced by Maimonides' earliest commentators. See the interpretations of Maimonides' remarks on providence presented by Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon published by Zevi Diesendruck, "Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence," *HUCA* 11 (1936): 341-366. See also below, chapter 4, 96; chapter 11, 415.

Eliphaz, which he treats as false and equates with the opinion of the Law (*Guide* 3.23), hardly leaves any doubt that Maimonides eschews the view of God's immediate role in extending providence to individuals. The intellect is the human being's guardian angel, while Satan, representing the privations associated with matter, is powerless to affect the perfect immortal intellect.¹⁵

As for miracles, Maimonides' position on how to understand them is far from clear. In the case of the most important miracle associated with the faith, namely, the resurrection of the dead—leaving aside the Revelation at Sinai, which Maimonides treats as a unique event belonging to a different category altogether¹⁶—he apparently did not accept a literal understanding of resurrection, his disclaimers to the opposite in his *Treatise on Resurrection* notwithstanding. The immortality of the perfect intellect is the only form of “resurrection” that Maimonides recognizes. This is at least the conclusion that appears upon a close reading of all his pronouncements on the subject.¹⁷ Other miracles he seems to regard as anomalies in nature. I have argued elsewhere that he may even have accepted the view that the prophet himself is the author of some of the miracles,¹⁸ though the evidence for this view is admittedly sketchy at best.

Overall, there is a good deal of scholarly literature on each of the topics mentioned above providing a strong basis for arguing that

15 For an in-depth study of Maimonides' commentary on Job, see Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43-77. See also Hannah Kasher, “The Image and Views of Job in the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Daat* 15 (1985): 81-89 (Heb.).

16 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 8.1. Maimonides agrees that miracles occurred at Sinai, but the voice heard at Sinai is not to be placed in the category of miracles; see *Guide* 2.33. See also Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 191-195, 230-232.

17 For an esotericist reading of Maimonides' treatise see, for example, Robert Krischner, “Maimonides' Fiction of Resurrection,” *HUCA* 52 (1982): 163-193.

18 Avicenna advances this theory, which in all likelihood was known to Maimonides. See my “Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 (1984): 106-114. See also below, chapter 9, 354-360. For a discussion of Maimonides' approach to miracles, see also Hannah Kasher, “Biblical Miracles and the Universality of Natural Laws: Maimonides' Three Methods of Harmonization,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1999): 25-52.

Maimonides held an esoteric position.¹⁹ Hence, when one looks at the issues Maimonides discusses after he lays down the doctrine of creation, one sees not only that on the exoteric level, after showing God's volition to act freely and in a direct manner, he "makes only sparing and very cautious use of this possibility," in the words of Guttmann; one also sees reasons for questioning whether he made any use of this possibility at all. If one accepts the evidence for an esotericist reading of Maimonides on these issues—certainly a big "if" for those who have not closely examined the issues, or have done so and remain unconvinced—one arrives at a strange conclusion: Maimonides believes in creation on religious as well as philosophic grounds, but treats the divine governance of the world, including the phenomena associated with revelatory religion, in a manner that is in complete harmony with the philosophic world view. Let us keep in mind that Maimonides had before him the model presented by Alfarabi, a philosopher he greatly admired, who explained revelation and the fundamental doctrines of revelatory religion in a naturalistic manner.²⁰

It is true that Maimonides labels creation the most important principle of the Law after the unity of God (*Guide* 2.13). It is not difficult to discern why: his appreciation of the fact that the vast majority of believers could not accept the divine origin of the Torah without belief in creation.²¹ It is no wonder that Maimonides works hard to defend this belief, given the stakes involved. After writing the *Guide*, he goes so far as to reformulate the fourth principle—God's eternal

19 It should be noted that Herbert Davidson in his book, *Moses Maimonides* (above, n. 2) chose to ignore many of the stronger arguments for an esotericist reading of Maimonides while dismissing this reading out of hand.

20 See, for example, Alfarabi's description of the laying down of perfect law in *The Political Regime*, translated by Fauzi Najjar in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 36-37. The theological doctrines of revelatory religion are treated by Alfarabi as philosophic truths presented in a figurative manner. For the influence of Alfarabi on Maimonides' views on the origins and function of revelatory religion and its relation to philosophy, see in particular Lawrence Berman, "Maimonides, the Disciple of Alfarabi," *Israel Oriental Studies* 4 (1974): 154-178.

21 One may further argue that many would even question the very existence of God without belief in creation, as Maimonides' comments in *Guide* 2.31 imply; see above, n. 9.

existence—of the thirteen principles of the faith that he had laid down in his *Commentary on the Mishnah: Introduction to Perek Heleq* to include creation. According to the original formulation, which stresses the unique nature of the eternity of God, one could accept this principle while still believing in the eternity of the world, as he himself indicates in his reformulation.²²

Up to this point in the argument I have not made any direct case for interpreting Maimonides as believing in eternity. My argument has simply been that if Maimonides holds an esoteric position regarding a number of major theological issues—a position that is far easier to prove—then at least one has grounds to wonder if the same is not the case for creation. This is not simply to claim that an esoteric stance on one issue inevitably implies esoteric positions on other issues as well. In this case, the issue of creation is the fundamental one underlying the other issues. Hence if Maimonides maintained an esoteric position on the major “derivative” issues, one has good reason to suppose that this is the case with the core issue. Moreover, Maimonides had every reason to present his true position on this issue in an even more veiled manner than he did on the others. By proving creation, Maimonides has removed the philosophic obstacles to a literal reading of Scripture on these issues, though he nevertheless rejects such a reading on many points quite explicitly. He could have utilized the doctrine of divine volition, which he has purportedly proven to advance a completely miraculous understanding of prophecy, more in keeping with a literal reading of Scripture, as well as a supernatural approach to divine providence, rather than treat them as esoteric doctrines belonging to the secrets of the Torah that are not to be understood in accordance with a literal reading of Scripture (*Guide* 1.35). Given this fact, one at least has a basis for wondering whether Maimonides’ adoption of an esoteric

22 For a discussion of this point, see Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 217-221. The original formulation, God’s absolute eternity, appears to be predicated on Avicenna’s notion of God’s necessary existence—namely, God’s essence is the cause of His existence. Hence even if other entities are eternal, their eternity is not of the same nature as that of God, since they possess only possible existence. They require an external agent, namely God, to actualize this possibility.

position is not also the case with the doctrine of creation. As we have seen, one can easily understand why, from a political-pedagogical perspective, Maimonides would publicly uphold the doctrine of creation even if privately he did not agree with it.

The Esotericist Reading of Maimonides' Position on Creation

The textual evidence in support of the interpretation that Maimonides believed in a world without beginning is certainly of a subtle nature, as the studies on this issue show. Maimonides' stated position in *Guide* 2.25 that if the eternity of the world would be proven demonstrably he could certainly interpret Scripture accordingly, just as he did in the case of the corporeal descriptions of God, which is a more difficult move from a textual standpoint, was picked up as early as the Middle Ages as a possible hint to an esoteric position, insofar as it makes the interpretation of Scripture subservient to human reason. Moreover, it is strange that Maimonides favors a literal reading of Scripture on a topic he characterizes as belonging to the secrets of the Law while on all other issues belonging to this category Maimonides chooses a figurative interpretation.²³

The favorite piece of evidence for esotericists on the issue of creation relates to Maimonides' presentation of three opinions on prophecy in *Guide* 2.32 (God gives prophecy to whomever He chooses; prophecy is received by all those possessing the necessary preconditions and only by them; certain fixed conditions are necessary for attaining prophecy, but God can miraculously withhold prophecy from one who possesses all the necessary qualifications), explicitly comparing them to the three opinions he presents on the question of the creation of the world in *Guide* 2.13 (creation *ex nihilo*; creation from eternal matter; the eternity of the world). The mental gymnastics practiced by the exotericists, who tried to show that creation *ex nihilo* most closely corresponds to the opinion brought by Maimonides in the name of the

23 A similar point is made by Roslyn Weiss in her review of Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (above, n. 5), *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75 (2007): 739.

Law that prophecy is a natural phenomenon, which God at times miraculously withholds from the worthy, and that creation *ex nihilo* does not correspond to the opinion of the masses that God grants prophecy to whom He wills without the person possessing any fixed qualifications—a position Maimonides completely dismisses—simply is not convincing, particularly in light of the problematic nature of the other match ups between the opinions on creation and those of prophecy that result if one adopts this view. The doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which imposes no limits on God's volitional activity except for what is conceptually impossible, most clearly corresponds to God's ability to bestow prophecy upon whomever He wishes.²⁴ Seeskin's suggestion that one should not look for a one-to-one match up is also problematic, since it does not account for why Maimonides would then point out the relation between the two subjects.²⁵

One other frequently adduced bit of evidence for an esoteric position is Maimonides' apparent contradiction involving emanation. In 2.11 of the *Guide* he agrees with this doctrine (cf. 1.58 and 1.69), while in 2.22 he criticizes it in detail. Arthur Hyman and Herbert Davidson argue that there is no contradiction, since Maimonides could hold the view that the world begins emanating from God with the volitional act of creation, a doctrine that Alexander Altmann had shown is in fact the view of Isaac Israeli.²⁶ Seeskin criticizes this view,²⁷ correctly in my opinion, but I find his own view that Maimonides never really embraces the doctrine of emanation equally problematic.²⁸ Maimonides alludes to his acceptance of the doctrine of emanation in the *Mishneh Torah*, Laws

24 For the bibliography dealing with this issue see above, n. 11.

25 See Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, 178-179.

26 See Arthur Hyman, "Maimonides on Creation and Emanation," in *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. John F. Wippel (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 45-61; Herbert Davidson, *Proofs for Eternity, Creation and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 208-209; Alexander Altmann, "Creation and Emanation in Isaac Israeli: A Reappraisal," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (above, n. 11), 1-15.

27 Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, 145-146.

28 *Ibid.*, 119-120.

of Principles of the Torah²⁹—where he also bases his abridged proof of God’s existence and unity on the doctrine of the eternity of the world³⁰—as well as other chapters of the *Guide*.³¹ The main criticism Maimonides presents against the doctrine of emanation in 2.22 focuses on the issue of how each Separate Intellect can be the source of emanation of a corporeal sphere. In other words, how can matter emanate from pure form? On this point, Maimonides’ position in 2.11, where he embraces the doctrine of emanation, is less than clear and is worthy of a separate study.³²

29 In Laws of Principles of the Torah 2.5, Maimonides writes: “In what manner are the Forms [Separate Intellects] separate from each other though they are not bodies? They are not equal in their existence but each one is below the level of the other *and exists by virtue of his power* [*ve-hu mazui me-koḥo*], one above the other. All of them exist by virtue of the power of God and His goodness.” This is a clear allusion to the doctrine of emanation, at least in regard to the Separate Intellects. Maimonides, however, does not allude to the immediate origin of the spheres in this context. See below, note 32.

30 Maimonides bases his proof of the existence and unity of God on the Aristotelian notion of the eternal motion of the sphere; see Laws of Principles of the Torah 1.5, 7. In *Guide* 1.71, however, he explains this move as follows: “For this reason you will always find that whenever, in what I have written in the books of jurisprudence, I happen to mention the foundations and start upon establishing the existence of the deity, I establish it by discourses that adopt the way of the doctrine of the eternity of the world. The reason is not that I believe in the eternity of the world, but that I wish to establish our belief in the existence of God, may He be exalted, through a demonstrative method as to which there is no disagreement in any respect” (182). It is not clear that Maimonides’ explanation in the *Guide* in fact represents his original intent in formulating his position in his legal works. For a discussion of this point, see Warren Z. Harvey, “The *Mishneh Torah* as a Key to the Secrets of the *Guide*,” in *Me’ah She’arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life*, ed. Ezra Fleischer et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 15-17.

31 In several passages in the *Guide*, Maimonides treats God as the source of emanation of the world; see 1.58, 69; 2.6.

32 In his brief presentation of the philosophic doctrine of emanation in 2.4, he does not explicitly attribute to the philosophers the doctrine that the spheres themselves emanate from the Separate Intellects—a doctrine that we find in Alfarabi and Avicenna, summarized by Halevi in the opening of the *Kuzari*, and subsequently brought by Maimonides in his critique of the philosophic position in 2.22. Rather Maimonides treats each Separate Intellect as the immediate agent of the *intellect* of each sphere. When he presents the doctrine of emanation *in his own name* in 2.11, however, he appears to allude to the position that the Separate Intellects are also the source of the body of the spheres and not only the sphere’s form or intellect. He writes: “For the overflow coming from Him, may he be exalted, for the bringing

An examination of the terminology used by Maimonides regarding creation shows that the terms he employs are equivocal, or that he treats the biblical terms he explains as being equivocal. Nuriel has analyzed the term “creator” (*al-bari*) in the *Guide*, showing that Maimonides does not employ this term when dealing with the creation of the world but in contexts more in harmony with the notion of an eternal world, thereby alluding to an esoteric view in this matter.³³ Sara Klein-Braslavy has shown that Maimonides interprets the Hebrew term for “create,” *bara'*, in an equivocal manner; it need not refer to creation *ex nihilo* but can refer to the emanation of form on matter, a doctrine that is in harmony with the notion of an eternal world.³⁴ Given Maimonides' view on the

into being of separate intellects overflows likewise from these intellects, so that one of them brings another one into being and this continues up to the Active Intellect. With the latter, the bringing in being of separate intellects comes to an end. Moreover a certain other act of bringing into being overflows from every separate intellect until the spheres come to an end with the sphere of the moon. After it there is the body subject to generation and corruption, I mean the first matter and what is composed of it” (275). In the latter passage it appears that only the question of the origin of sublunar matter is left open. Yet in a previous passage in the same chapter, he writes: “. . . that from the benefits received by the intellect, good things and lights overflow to the bodies of the spheres” (275). From this passage it appears that the bodies themselves do not have their origin in the Separate Intellects, only their form, and perhaps this is what Maimonides had in mind when he speaks of the emanation of the Separate Intellects that involves the bringing about of the spheres. This leaves open the problem of how Maimonides understood the origin of the bodies of the spheres, or of matter in general, if he did not in fact believe in the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. It appears that Maimonides at least entertained doubts regarding the emanation of matter from what is incorporeal, even if he favored the doctrine of the eternity of the world. One should add that the problem of whether the bodies of the spheres emanate from the Separate Intellects is discussed briefly in Averroes' *Epitome to the Metaphysics*. In this treatise, Averroes accepts the doctrine of emanation and sees in each of the Movers of the spheres the cause of the form (soul) of the sphere and the cause of a different Mover. As for the body of the sphere, he argues: “. . . the cause of the existence of the matters of the celestial bodies is nothing but their forms.” See Rudiger Arnzen (trans.), *Averroes on Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 169-175.

33 Avraham Nuriel, “The Question of a Primordial or Created World in the Philosophy of Maimonides,” *Tarbiz* 33 (1964): 372-387 (Heb.) [reprinted in Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 25-40 (Heb.)].

34 Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1987), 81-90 (Heb.).

equivocal nature of biblical terms, it is more than plausible that he should hint to his esoteric views by means of the equivocal meanings of the terms he employs. He alludes to this technique in his admonition to the reader to “grasp each word that occurs in it in the course of the speech” of his treatise (*Guide* 1.introduction 15).

When one starts looking at the *Guide* with at least a suspicion that he holds an esoteric position, one finds more and more signs in support of this interpretation. Perhaps in some cases these readings can be attributed to the overly creative imagination of the interpreter, but I certainly do not think all of them can be so easily dismissed. It appears to me that Maimonides adopted a gamut of esoteric techniques to hint at his true view on this matter.³⁵ Let me present a few examples.³⁶

One of the techniques for conveying an esoteric position is to attack a doctrine held by an opponent who does not belong to your “camp,” though this doctrine essentially characterizes your own tradition’s position. The average reader, even if he senses that there is a problem, will not pay too much attention to it since he is accustomed to

35 Herbert Davidson dismisses the strongest argument for Maimonides’ esotericism—namely, that Maimonides *explicitly* indicates that he has incorporated contradictions in the *Guide* on purpose in order to veil his views—by arguing that Maimonides wrote the introduction before writing the bulk of his treatise; he subsequently changed his mind about using this technique, or any other, for masking his true views, which he proceeds to present quite openly. See *Moses Maimonides* (above, n. 2), 330, 391. Even if one accepts Davidson’s view about the writing of the introduction, one need not accept his conclusion. Rather than retract his intention to write a treatise containing an esoteric level, Maimonides may have in fact developed additional strategies for alluding to his esoteric views.

36 See my “*The Guide of the Perplexed and the Art of Concealment*,” in *By the Well: Studies in Jewish Philosophy and Halakhic Thought Presented to Gerald J. Blidstein*, ed. Uri Ehrlich, Howard Kreisel, and Daniel Lasker (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2008), 487-507 (Heb.). In this article I also deal with a number of additional techniques not described below. On the issue of esoteric writing I am very much indebted to Leo Strauss’s masterful essay cited above, n. 3. There are no set rules for esoteric writing, for the premise of esoteric writing is that the reader will pick up on certain “irregularities” in the text, treat these irregularities as deliberate in character, and draw deductions regarding their purpose. Much then depends on the mind of the reader. Maimonides explicitly brings one such type of irregularity—arguments based on contradictory premises. As argued in the previous note, this technique hardly exhausts the possibilities for esoteric writing and the other techniques Maimonides may have chosen to employ.

dismiss out of hand the truth of the doctrines of those who belong to different traditions. The careful reader, on the other hand, discerns that this attack hints at the fact that the author does not accept his own tradition's view on the matter. Maimonides appears to adopt this technique when he discusses one of the Kalām's positions, a theology of which he is exceptional critical. According to Maimonides, instead of exploring the major questions of speculation based on a profound understanding of the principles of reality, the Moslem theologians invent their principles in accordance with the criterion of how best to defend religious doctrines.³⁷ In the course of presenting the Aristotelian proofs for the eternity of the world, in *Guide* 2.14 Maimonides presents the following argument:

He [Aristotle] asserts that with respect to everything that is produced in time, the possibility of its being produced precedes in time the production of the thing itself. And similarly with respect to everything that changes, the possibility of its changing precedes in time the change itself. From this premise he made a necessary inference as to the perpetuity of circular motion, its having no end and no beginning. His later followers in their turn made it clear by means of this premise that the world was eternal. They said: Before the world came into being, its production in time must have been either possible or necessary or impossible. Now if it was necessary, the world could not have been nonexistent. If its production in time was impossible, it could not be true that it ever would exist. And if it was possible, what was the substratum of this possibility? For there indubitably must be an existent thing that is the substratum of this possibility and in virtue of which it is said of the thing that it is possible. This is a very powerful method for establishing the eternity of the world. However, an intelligent man from among the later Mutalallimūn thought that he had solved this difficulty. He said: Possibility resides in the agent and not in the thing that is the object of action. This, however, is no reply, for there are two possibilities. For with respect to everything produced in time, the possibility of its being produced precedes in time the thing itself. And similarly in the agent that produced it, there is the possibility to produce that which it has produced before it has done so. There are indubitably two possibilities: a possibility in the matter to

37 *Guide* 1.71.

become that particular thing, and a possibility in the agent to produce that particular thing. (287)

In the passage above, Maimonides presents an Aristotelian argument, brings the objection of the Kalām, and then brings the rebuttal of the philosophers to this objection, which he treats as successfully dismissing the objection. In order for something to be generated, there must exist two types of possibility. Maimonides himself in the previous chapter championed the opinion that the world was created *ex nihilo*, hence there existed no matter in which the possibility of the world resided. In a subsequent chapter, he dismisses the Aristotelian argument based on possibility as follows:

We shall make a similar assertion with regard to the possibility that must of necessity precede everything that is generated. For this is only necessary in regard to this being that is stabilized—in this being everything that is generated, is generated from some being. But in the case of a thing created from nothing, neither the senses nor the intellect point to something that must be preceded by its possibility. (2.17: 297)

According to Maimonides, the law that nothing is generated unless it is preceded by possibility found in matter only holds true after creation *ex nihilo* and is not an absolute law covering all conceivable existence. Thus God can create a world without there existing any substratum. The fact that Maimonides holds the view that there is an argument that rebuts the philosophic position on this issue raises the question of why he bothers to bring the argument of the Kalām against the philosophers only to then reject their argument. Ostensibly Maimonides' position is similar to the one they bring—namely, that there need not exist any matter supporting the possibility for creation and it is sufficient that God as agent possesses the capacity to create.

One may answer that Maimonides is critical of the Kalām because they were of the opinion that they were able to rebut the view of the philosophers based on the philosophers' own principles. Maimonides shows that they failed in this regard. Maimonides' own argument is not based on the principles of the philosophers, which he accepts, but upon

a different principle—the difference between the laws of nature governing the world after it was formed and conceptual laws that necessarily characterize every activity, including divine activity. That everything generated must be preceded by a substratum that supports the possibility of generation is a physical law and not a logical one in his view.³⁸ Thus Maimonides' argument against the philosophers is far different than the objection raised by the Kalām, despite a certain similarity between them.

There is, however, the alternative of interpreting Maimonides as alluding to an esoteric doctrine. By bringing the Kalām's argument in *Guide* 2.14, which appears to be extraneous to the discussion, since it belongs to his subsequent discussion and rejection of the philosophic arguments in chapter 17, Maimonides hints that he does not in fact accept the doctrine that he brings in chapter 13 and defends in chapter 17—God's ability to create the world *ex nihilo*. His rebuttal of the Kalām's argument, which arouses no problem in the average reader, while subsequently presenting an argument that essentially supports a similar position as the one advanced by the Kalām when defending the traditional position, is the way he signals to his more astute readers that he is not committed to the traditional view.

My second example is one in which a certain philosophic position is rebutted by the author, but then the rebuttal itself is answered by the author, essentially allowing the philosophic position to stand. In 2.22, in the midst of his critique of the doctrine of emanation, Maimonides ridicules this doctrine by claiming that it leads to the disgraceful conclusion: "it would follow that the deity, whom everyone who is intelligent recognizes to be perfect in every kind of perfection, could, as far as all

38 One should also note that in Maimonides' presentation of the philosophic position in *Guide* 2.14, he talks of the possibility in the agent if one posits creation, a point that he knows is conceptually impossible since no possibility can exist in God. This too is one of the arguments of the philosophers against creation. God's activity must remain constant through eternity. Maimonides acknowledges that this indeed is a great difficulty that he proceeds to address in *Guide* 2.18, though in a manner that is not completely convincing. The distinction between natural impossibilities (which are conceptually possible) and conceptual impossibilities underlies Maimonides' discussion of the impossible in *Guide* 3.15.

the beings are concerned, produce nothing new in any of them; if He wished to lengthen a fly's wing or to shorten a worm's foot, He would not be able to do it" (319). In short, the deity of the Aristotelian philosophers is completely impotent—certainly a conclusion that no one is prepared to accept. What is significant in this case is Maimonides' next sentence, one in which he essentially undermines his own argument. "But Aristotle will say that He would not wish it and that it is impossible for Him to will something different from what is; that it would not add to His perfection but would perhaps from a certain point of view be a deficiency." Maimonides does not proceed to rebut Aristotle's counter-argument, as we would expect him to do, but allows Aristotle to have the last word on this matter, thereby subtly signaling his agreement with Aristotle's position. Indeed, for Maimonides, God created the world in a perfect manner, and thus He would not wish to introduce any change, certainly any permanent change, in what he created, Maimonides argues in 2.29.³⁹

A third example of a possible allusion to an esoteric position on the issue of creation is a comment made in passing in 3.45 in his discussion of the reason for the image of two cherubim on the ark of the Law. Maimonides begins his discussion with the following remark: "It is known that the fundamental principle of belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law. For if there is no prophet, there can be no Law. The prophet receives prophetic revelation only through the intermediary of an angel" (576). Maimonides concludes: "Consequently it has been made clear that belief in the existence of angels precedes the belief in prophecy and the belief in prophecy precedes the belief in the Law." The question immediately arises of where in the picture one finds creation, which in *Guide* 2.25 was the basis for belief in the Law. This is exactly the point: one does not. Belief in angels upon which prophecy and the Law are dependent, that is to say belief in Separate Intellects and the faculties of the soul of the prophet, is in harmony with the doctrine of eternity. In short, one may believe in prophecy and the Law

39 Maimonides indicates there that God may wish to introduce temporary changes, i.e. miracles, for historical ends. His discussion in 2.22, however, appears to deal with the possibility of permanent changes.

even if one does not believe in creation. Lest this point be completely lost on his readers, Maimonides repeats it in the continuation of his discussion: “Thus it has become clear through what we have stated before that the belief in the existence of angels is consequent upon the belief in the existence of the deity, and that thereby prophecy and the Law are established as valid . . . this correct opinion, *coming in second place after the belief in the existence of the deity*, constituting the origina-tive principle of belief in prophecy and the Law, and refuting idolatry, as we have explained” (577). Note that belief in angels does not simply supplement belief in creation in this context—it replaces it. No longer does creation come in second place after belief in the existence of the deity.⁴⁰ This may well be an example of the seventh type of contradic-tion discussed by Maimonides in the introduction of his treatise:

In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others. Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means. (18)

The contradiction in the case of basing the Law on belief in angels as opposed to basing it on the world’s creation is far from glaring, for belief in creation does not contradict belief in angels. The contradic-tion only becomes evident when one recalls that belief in angels (as Separate Intellects as well as the forces of nature) is in harmony with the philosophic view of the eternity of the world. Thus one may claim that the missing premise upon which Maimonides bases his remarks on *Guide* 3.45 is that the world is eternal. In this case, one can summarize the seventh form of contradiction as follows:

⁴⁰ Maimonides speaks specifically of creation following the *unity* of God. It appears that he treats the existence and unity of God as essentially the same principle, though he divides them in his list of thirteen principles.

Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity [to defend the religion] requires that the discussion [in *Guide* 2.25] proceed on the basis of a certain premise [the creation of the world], whereas in another place [*Guide* 3.45] necessity [to present the truths of speculation] requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise [the eternity of the world] contradicting the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means [he plants in the course of his discussion of the reasons for the commandments a remark that is in harmony with the eternity of the world—that belief in the existence of angels follows belief in God and is the basis for belief in the Law—in order to allude to his stance. The vulgar do not discern that the premise upon which his discussion is based contradicts the notion that the world is created].

A final example: as we have seen above, the most important theological reason that Maimonides advances for favoring the view that the world is created is that “with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible, and all that may be asked on this subject vanish. Thus it might be said: Why did God give prophetic revelation to this one and not to that” (*Guide* 2.25: 329)? Following is a list of additional questions whose answers are ostensibly based on belief in creation, such as: “Why did God give this Law to this particular nation, and why did He not legislate to the others; why did He legislate at this particular time and why did He not legislate before it or after; why did He impose these commandments and these prohibitions . . . ?” The belief in creation allows one to answer all these questions in terms of a divine will that intervenes in history: “The answer to all these questions would be that it would be said: He wanted it this way or His wisdom required it this way” (329). Yet in his discussion of prophecy immediately following his discussion of creation, Maimonides in effect answers the question of why God gives prophetic revelation to one rather than another by upholding a naturalistic model—one who has attained all the conditions for prophecy receives the prophetic emanation and one who has not completed all the requirements does not. This suggests that a naturalistic model may also provide the answers to the other questions. Belief in creation is necessary for belief in the divine origin of the Law only in the case of the average

believer, since his commitment to the Law hinges on viewing the revelation of the Law as a supernatural phenomenon.

A Philosophic-Esotericist Reading of Maimonides' Position on Creation

Despite the strength of Maimonides' philosophic arguments in favor of creation, there appear to be some flaws in his reasoning. Flaws in a philosophic argument in themselves certainly do not indicate an esoteric position. I would like to point out at least one flaw, however, that seems to involve a contradiction in Maimonides' own thought, perhaps signaling an esoteric position in accordance with the seventh form of contradiction.

Maimonides' version of the doctrine of particularization is different than the argument of Al-Ghazali against the philosophers in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, as Davidson has shown.⁴¹ Seeskin has picked up on this point and elaborated upon it.⁴² In Al-Ghazali's version, particularization of the poles around which the spheres revolve or their direction of motion is the result of an arbitrary will. God's will is capable of choosing between two completely similar possibilities. Even according to the principles of the philosophers, Al-Ghazali says, It would make no difference whatsoever if two other equidistant points were chosen, rather than the North and South Poles around which the spheres rotate, or if the highest sphere moved from West to East rather than East to West, while the other spheres rotate in the opposite direction.⁴³ Similarly, Al-Ghazali maintains that God can choose when to create a non-eternal world, though there is no difference between the possible moments of creation.

Once I can establish that things are particularized without any reference to wisdom, that wisdom has no role at all to play in certain choices, I can establish a meaningful notion of divine volition. The very

41 Herbert Davidson, "Argument from the Concept of Particularization in Arabic Philosophy," *Philosophy East and West* 18 (1968): 299-314.

42 Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, 127-143.

43 Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, ed. and trans. Michael Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 1.48-64: 24-27.

act of giving existence to the world, let alone when to give existence to the world, can be regarded as an arbitrary choice. There is no reason from the standpoint of wisdom to favor existence over non-existence.

Maimonides does not go this route, a route which in a crucial sense may be a more convincing way to prove creation. Rather, Maimonides appears to treat all divine decisions as reflecting purpose, and I interpret the notion of “purpose” in Maimonides’ thought as an act reflecting the combination of wisdom and will.⁴⁴ Maimonides frequently introduces the notion of divine wisdom and not will alone in dealing with the act of creation.⁴⁵ Moreover, in 3.25 he treats all of God’s actions as good and excellent, namely, “that accomplished by an agent aiming at a noble end, I mean one that is necessary and useful, and achieves that end” (503).⁴⁶ Hence Maimonides feels that the direction and size of the spheres are not products of arbitrary will, but of an unfathomable divine wisdom. Maimonides’ argument is that a carefully designed world in which all details have a purpose—that is to say, are the product of wisdom and will—can only be maintained if one regards such a world as having been created. An eternal world is a necessary one, in which all parts of heaven should be uniform, and not a world that reflects a wisdom guiding the will to act in a purposive—and not arbitrary—manner by giving existence to the many different qualities possessed by the heavenly bodies in accordance with the divine purpose (*Guide* 2.19-21).⁴⁷ Moreover, it appears that for Maimonides the very act of choosing to create the world is a product of wisdom and not will alone, existence being preferable to non-existence.⁴⁸

44 *Guide* 2.19; see Seeskin, *Maimonides on the Origin of the World*, 141-142.

45 *Guide* 2.18-19, 27, 29; 3.23, 25.

46 For a discussion of the concept “good” in Maimonides’ thought, see Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 93-124.

47 Let me add parenthetically that even the details of the commandments are not arbitrary for Maimonides, despite his statement to the contrary in *Guide* 3.26; see Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), 25-33.

48 Maimonides’ position on the purpose of the existence of the world in its entirety is ambiguous. He concludes *Guide* 3.13: “When man knows his own soul . . . his thoughts are not troubled by seeking a final end for what has not that final end; or by seeking any final end for what has no final end except its own existence, which depends on the divine will—if you prefer you can also say: on the divine wisdom”

I find Maimonides' reasons for dismissing the possibility of an *eternal* creation of such a world in accordance with divine purpose unconvincing. I do not see why the two propositions, 1) that the world always existed and 2) that it is the product of divine purpose, are treated by Maimonides as irreconcilable, particularly in light of the otherness of divine wisdom and the activities resulting from it in Maimonides' thought. Why must purpose necessarily precede action and not exist with it simultaneously? Let us recall that one of the criticisms Maimonides aims against Aristotle is that the eternity of divine wisdom does not necessitate the eternity of the world since the unknowable divine wisdom may have regarded it as preferable to create a world having a temporal beginning (*Guide* 2.18).⁴⁹ This argument, however, can be turned against Maimonides himself. The unknowable divine wisdom may have regarded it as preferable to create an eternal world according to the divine purpose. Eternal creation is certainly not a conceptual impossibility, so why dismiss this option?⁵⁰ Furthermore, if existence is preferable to non-existence from the standpoint of wisdom, the option to create an eternal world appears to be the preferable one, at least from a human perspective.

Furthermore, if every divine choice for Maimonides is a product of wisdom, could God ever choose to act differently? Does not His very essence necessitate every choice? Only if we posit that there exist arbitrary choices, and the very purpose underlying the creation of the world as we know it is such a choice, can we escape this dilemma. Yet Maimonides, as I have argued, does not appear to accept the existence of arbitrary choices—all divine actions are good and excellent in reference to their ends and not only to their means (*Guide* 3.25), even if we do not always fathom the wisdom underlying them. In short, we have arrived at the conclusion that God could never act differently than He

(456). Maimonides may be interpreted as saying that existence is a final end in itself, and the choice between existence and non-existence is not between similar possibilities from the perspective of divine wisdom.

49 For the inscrutability of divine wisdom, see also *Guide* 3.23.

50 Among later Jewish philosophers, Ḥasdai Crescas treats the doctrines of divine will and creation *ex nihilo* as in harmony with the doctrine of the eternity of the world. See *Or Ha-Shem* 3.1.5.

does, He cannot choose either to will or not will something, for He can never act contrary to wisdom and all choices are the product of divine wisdom. Though Maimonides at times speaks of divine choices and God's ability to act in different ways,⁵¹ these "choices" appear to be purely theoretical and can never be actualized. The Aristotelian philosophers are accused by Maimonides of ascribing necessity to God by positing eternal creation (*Guide* 2.21), yet the *necessity* of creating a non-eternal world is the conclusion to which Maimonides' argument leads. The way out of this dilemma is to posit that necessity and volition are not necessarily contradictory terms and an act can be necessary from a certain perspective and volitional from another.⁵² If this is the case, the obstacle for positing eternal creation is removed—the act of creating an eternal world is necessarily mandated by divine wisdom, yet at the same time it is a voluntary act not caused by any reasons external to God.

As I have already noted, a philosophic flaw in the argument in itself hardly points to an esoteric position. Contradictions in Maimonides' stance, however, may. In this case we can certainly point to an apparent contradiction. Maimonides argues, as we have seen, that what is eternal and not changing is necessary, and necessity and volition are mutually exclusive. This argument appears to be based on the Aristotelian principle that what is possible must be realized in the course of eternity.⁵³ But does Maimonides consistently maintain this position? The answer is no. Consider Maimonides' position in regard to the destruction of the world. In 2.27 he writes:

However, in view of our claim, based on the Law, that things exist and perish according to His will, may He be exalted, and not in virtue of necessity, it is not necessary for us to profess that when He, may He be exalted, brings into existence a thing that had not existed, He must necessarily cause this existent to pass away. Rather does the

51 See, for example, *Guide* 2.17: "And its Creator may, if He wishes to do so, render it [the world] entirely and absolutely nonexistent" (297).

52 See for example Crescas's discussion of human volition in *Or Ha-Shem* 2.5.5.

53 See *Physics* 3.4, 203b; *Metaphysics* 9.4, 1074b; cf. *Guide* 2.1 (third proof for the existence of God).

matter inevitably depend on His will: if He wills, He causes the thing to pass away; and if He wills, He causes it to last; or it depends on what is required by His wisdom. It is accordingly possible that He should cause it to last for ever and ever and to endure as He Himself, may He be exalted, endures. (332-333)

The argument at first glance is simple. The Aristotelian natural principle that what is generated must also pass away⁵⁴ does not hold in the case of the passing away of the world. Its continuous existence is due to divine will and not natural necessity, just as is the case with its creation. But this leaves us with the strange conclusion that what is eternal—the existence *a parte post* of the world—is not necessary but the product of volition. Let us formulate Maimonides' position in a slightly different manner: God could destroy the world but He never will. This certainly sounds like another way of saying that the eternal existence of the world is necessary. Isn't that what Maimonides maintained in reference to the eternity *a parte ante* of the world? If in regard to the future existence of the world eternity does not exclude volition, how can Maimonides deny that this is not also the case with the past existence of the world?

There is yet another passage where Maimonides treats an eternal action as the product of choice and not necessity. In his description of the spheres and Separate Intellects in 2.7, he writes: “they apprehend their acts and have will and free choice (*irāda wa-'ikhtiyār*) with regard to the governance committed to them, just as we have will (*irāda*) with regard to that which from the foundation of our existence has been committed to us and given over to our power. Only we sometimes do things that are more defective than other things, and our actions are preceded by privations; whereas the intellects and the spheres are not like that, but *always* do that which is good” (266). In short, volition on one hand and acting through eternity in the same manner without change in accordance with wisdom on the other hand, are not regarded by Maimonides as mutually exclusive propositions. Again we may ask,

54 Maimonides brings this principle also in *Guide* 2.14 (third method); see Aristotle, *On the Heavens* 1.12, 282a.

why does Maimonides subsequently argue differently when it comes to the origin of the world? There seems to be different definitions of will and volition at the heart of Maimonides' different discussions,⁵⁵ not all of them contradicting the notion of the willful creation of a world without beginning.

Conclusion

The problems and even contradictions in Maimonides' argument on behalf of creation that I have pointed out are probably not insurmountable and they should certainly not obscure the fact that Maimonides does present an excellent defense of creation. So why was Maimonides so philosophically ingenious in his defense of creation, if he did not really favor this doctrine from the standpoint of speculative truth? Perhaps he was interested in making an exceptional effort in hiding his esoteric position on this issue given his perception of the religious stakes involved. It was important for him to provide his co-religionists with good philosophical reasons to adopt creation in order to strengthen their commitment to the religious tradition. In short, what better defense against the philosophers can there be than by showing that their position not only conflicts with religion but also with philosophic reasoning, even if secretly Maimonides favored the philosophic position and felt that all the salient doctrines of tradition could be understood in accordance with the philosophic world view. At any rate, I think that the esotericist can only hope to show that there are valid reasons for adopting this interpretation of Maimonides' treatise in regard to the issue of creation, even if none of the arguments when taken individually are absolutely convincing. Given the strength of Maimonides' explicit defense of creation, that in itself is no small task.

55 For a detailed study of the two terms Maimonides uses for divine will—*irāda* and *mashī'ya*—and the significance of his usage for the understanding of his philosophy, see Avraham Nuriel, "The Divine Will in *More Nevukhim*," *Tarbiz* 39 (1970): 39-61 (Heb.) [reprinted in Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 41-63].

Appendix: The Platonic View of Creation from Eternal Matter and an Esotericist Reading of Maimonides

In his article “Maimonides’ Secret Position on Creation,”⁵⁶ Davidson argues against the esotericist interpretation of Maimonides. He indicates, however, that if one is prone to adopt an esotericist interpretation, it is far easier to defend the view that Maimonides agrees with the Platonic position of creation from eternal matter rather than with the Aristotelian position. In his book, *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds*, Joel Kraemer accepts this interpretation.⁵⁷ There is much merit in the claim that the allusions to Maimonides’ acceptance of the Platonic position are more manifest than those toward the Aristotelian one. In 2.13 he classifies the Platonic position with the Aristotelian one, arguing:

For they believe in eternity; and there is in our opinion no difference between those who believe that heaven must of necessity be generated from a thing and pass away into a thing or the belief of Aristotle who believed that it is not subject to generation and corruption. For the purpose of every follower of the Law of Moses and Abraham our Father or of those who go the way of these two is to believe that there is nothing eternal in any way at all existing simultaneously with God. (285)

While refraining from discussing the Platonic position in the following chapters, in 2.25 he adopts a different position altogether on how he views creation from eternal matter: “For if creation in time were demonstrated—if only as Plato understands creation—all the overhasty claims made to us on this point by the philosophers would become void. In the same way, if the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating eternity as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become

⁵⁶ See above, n. 11.

⁵⁷ New York: Doubleday, 2008, 382-387; see also 576-577, n. 153. Alfred Ivry argues that Maimonides accepts a Neoplatonized version of the Platonic view on this issue rather than the Neoplatonized version of Aristotle’s view; see Ivry, “Maimonides on Creation,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990): 115-137 (Heb.).

void, and a shift to other opinions would take place” (330).⁵⁸ Rather than identifying Plato’s position with Aristotle, in that they both posit something coeternal with God, he now identifies Plato’s position with the position of the Law, in that they both ascribe volition to God. Maimonides goes on in the next chapter to suggest that Rabbi Eliezer may have accepted the Platonic view, thereby showing that this view apparently had the sanction of a leading rabbinic authority. Maimonides’ explicit position in 2.32 that prophecy is a perfection that God can miraculously withhold from the worthy individual most closely corresponds to the Platonic position that combines naturalism with divine voluntarism. One may add that some of Maimonides’ intimations, mentioned above, to the eternity of the world can be viewed as much a support of the Platonic position as the Aristotelian one.

Several approaches may be adopted in dealing with the problem of why Maimonides appears to hint at two different positions regarding the world’s eternity while explicitly upholding the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. One is to dismiss altogether the view that he favored the Aristotelian position. As we have seen, most of the allusions to his acceptance of Aristotle’s view are exceptionally subtle and, it may be argued, originate in the mind of the interpreter rather than reflect Maimonides’ true intent. His allusions to Plato’s view, on the other hand, are more evident. The Neoplatonized version of Aristotle’s view, which posits the emanation of matter from incorporeal being, was particularly problematic from a philosophic perspective, perhaps not less than the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. The doctrine of creation from eternal matter at least avoids this particular difficulty.

Another approach is to ascribe to Maimonides a quasi-skeptical position on this issue. He tended to accept the philosophers’ view that matter must be eternal, but debated between the Aristotelian and Platonic positions. His hints toward both views allude to his uncertainty on this question.

A further approach, the one which I favor, is to view Maimonides as incorporating in his treatise levels of esotericism. He hints to both

58 There is an interesting parallel between Maimonides’ statement and the position voiced by Halevi in *Kuzari* 1.67.

the Platonic and Aristotelian positions because of the common denominator between these positions—an incorporeal God cannot create matter. He provides more overt allusions to the Platonic position insofar as it is a less problematic position from the standpoint of the masses' belief in the Law, while avoiding the major difficulty with the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. In short, it is a good compromise position for those readers who would find the Aristotelian position too radical, too greatly opposed to tradition, yet at the same time are disturbed by the traditional position from a philosophic perspective. For this reason, Maimonides employs a more moderate esotericism in alluding to it.⁵⁹ Hence while he favors the Aristotelian position, his hints toward this position are far more subtle, to be grasped only by the most elite readers, because of its potential harm to the average believer. Of course one may argue that the exoteric reading of Maimonides is another alternative, but as I have tried to show, there are many good reasons for questioning this reading.

59 See Weiss, "Natural Order or Divine Will," 24-26. For the notion of different levels of exotericism/esotericism in Maimonides' *Guide*, see also Sarah Klein-Braslavy, "Maimonides' Exoteric and Esoteric Biblical Interpretation in the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2006), 137-164; Lawrence Kaplan, "Monotonically Decreasing Esotericism and the Purpose of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Maimonides after 800 Years*, ed. Jay Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 135-150.

Section II

Three Jewish Philosophers of Provence





Moses Ibn Tibbon: Translator and Philosophical Exegete

Introduction

In his famous parable of the king in *Guide of the Perplexed* 3.51, Maimonides describes different groups of people in their physical proximity to the ruler.¹ There are those who are completely outside the polis; those within the polis but who walk in the opposite direction of the palace; those facing the right direction but who are so distant from the palace that they do not see it at all; those who make their way to the outer wall of the palace and are searching for the entrance; those who have entered the palace grounds and are in the outer court; and finally, those who have entered the inner court and have come to be with the king. As typical of the parables that are brought in the *Guide*—and as opposed to prophetic and rabbinic parables that, according to Maimonides, are designed to conceal as much as to reveal—he offers an explanation of the parable, lest the identity of the various groups be lost upon the reader.

¹ For a discussion of this parable and some of the studies dealing with it, see also chapter 2, 36-38.

Let us begin our focus on those who made it to the palace walls but are looking for the gate. Maimonides labels them: “The jurists who believe in true opinions on the basis of traditional authority and study the Law concerning the practices of divine service, but do not engage in speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion and make no inquiry whatever regarding the rectification of belief” (619).² Those who have entered the gates are described as having, “plunged into speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion.” One reaching the inner courtyard is said to have “achieved demonstration, to the extent that that is possible, of everything that may be demonstrated; and who has ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that that is possible, everything that may be ascertained; and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it.”

One of the points that impresses the reader of the parable and its explanation is that these groups refer to divisions within the Jewish people. This stands in sharp contrast to those outside the city and those with their backs to the palace, groups that designate non-Jews in Maimonides’ explanation of the parable. The enumeration of the Jewish groups begins with those who do not see the king’s habitation but are facing in the right direction. Maimonides explicitly labels them “the multitude of the adherents of the Law, I refer to the ignoramuses who observe the commandments.” The last phrase—“the ignoramuses who observe the commandments”—is in Hebrew rather than Arabic, lest there be any doubt among Maimonides’ Jewish readers to which multitude he is referring. While the terminology employed by him in describing the subsequent groups is more neutral, and one may argue that it can also refer to jurists belonging to other religions, both the narrow context of the passage and its wider context support the view that Maimonides is referring to Jewish scholars. The “Law” (Arabic, *din*) is not any law, but specifically Jewish law. Only when Maimonides reaches the last group—those who know everything that can be known about divine matters in the manner most appropriate to knowing

2 All English citations from this treatise in this chapter are from Shlomo Pines’s translation (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963). All other translations in this chapter are my own unless noted otherwise.

them—does one begin to wonder what is specifically Jewish in his description. True, this group appears to consist of those Jews who belonged to the previous one but took the additional step. Yet could not the same description be applied to Aristotle? Did he not speculate upon “divine matters”—that is, metaphysics—ascertaining all that was possible to ascertain in the most appropriate manner possible? Did he not literally write *the* book on the subject?

The problem only deepens in light of the continuation of the passage. Maimonides offers a second explanation regarding those who reach the king’s habitation. He indicates that those engaged in the mathematical sciences—for example, arithmetic and astronomy—are outside the walls and searching for the gates. Those who study the natural sciences have entered the antechambers. Finally, those who have achieved perfection in the natural sciences and have understood the divine science are in the inner court. In this case there appears to be no specific Jewish content to the required curriculum to reach the ruler. The curriculum is the standard philosophical one. What then is the relation between Maimonides’ two explanations? Is the second one an alternative, non-specifically Jewish, way to reach perfection, which he describes in a figurative manner in terms of physical proximity to the king? Or is it complementary to the first path Maimonides lays down, both being necessary, and ultimately merging, in reaching the final goal?

Everything I have written till now is well known to scholars of Maimonides, who have debated the meaning of the parable through the ages. At stake is the question how necessary is Judaism for reaching perfection. Within the context of Judaism, there can be no higher stakes. Maimonides may be excused for being vague, and deliberately so, by not indicating the relation between the two paths of learning he presents. In fact, the vagueness itself is significant. When all is said and done, it is unclear to which group belongs Aristotle, the great monotheist and chief of the philosophers in Maimonides’ estimation.³

Let us leave aside this problem for a moment and turn to a different, though related, one. How much closer do students who

3 I have dealt with this issue above, chapter 2, 36-38.

study Maimonides' treatises get to the king in his view? Take, for example, the avid student of the *Mishneh Torah*, the pioneering work in which Maimonides codified all of Jewish law. He refers to this work as his "great (*al-kabir*) treatise," for law is the primary means for directing society as a whole in the direction of human perfection. The person studying this composition will attain true opinions (according to Maimonides) on the basis of traditional authority and will know all the practices of the divine service. But as for speculation concerning the fundamental principles, it is difficult to maintain that Maimonides supplies in this work the requisite knowledge, except for a few salient speculative details in the opening section of the treatise, "Laws of the Principles of the Torah." In short, one who studies the *Mishneh Torah* in detail reaches the outer wall of the palace and is still looking for the gate, according to Maimonides' parable. One may add that he also supplies directions in the *Mishneh Torah*, primarily in the opening section, to finding the gate and locating the key to enter, but hardly more than that. And what may be said to be the fate of the avid student of the *Guide of the Perplexed*? Has not this student, by the very act of careful reading and thinking about what is read, "plunged into speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion," as Maimonides puts it, which is the key to entering the antechamber of the king's palace? Such a student will have an understanding of divine attributes, possess proofs for the existence of God, have engaged in speculation concerning divine governance, studied from a philosophic point of view the pros and cons of accepting the notion of creation *ex nihilo*, and learned additional significant theoretical matters that are discussed in the *Guide*. Moreover, this student will also absorb, by a careful reading of this treatise, the fundamentals for a true interpretation of Scripture and rabbinic midrash. From this perspective, one may say that the *Guide* was written as a continuation of the *Mishneh Torah*. The latter book brings its readers to the gate, and the former gives them entrance to the antechambers.

It is certainly clear, however, that the *Guide* does not bring its readers to the inner court in Maimonides' view. Many subjects belonging

to the divine science are not covered at all, or covered only in a summary manner. At best, the *Guide* provides some preliminary knowledge to gaining access to the inner habitation of the ruler. Moreover, when one looks at the second path laid down by Maimonides for reaching the ruler—the path focusing on learning the sciences in their proper order—the relevance of the *Guide* becomes even more highly questionable. It offers almost no guidance in the mathematical sciences, little in the natural sciences, and covers topics in the divine science in a very sketchy manner at best. The crucial point is that Maimonides expects his readers to already have learnt these matters, as he indicates in the dedicatory epistle of the *Guide* to his student, Joseph ben Judah of Ceuta, for whom he wrote his treatise (and for those like him). In the *Guide*, he at times excuses himself from not entering into certain philosophic issues, such as the nature of the human intellect, directing his readers to the philosophic corpus that they should refer to instead.⁴ One may argue that the *Guide* was written for those who were driven to the second path—and in the case of his select disciple, Maimonides himself was the one who drove him in this direction—and became perplexed because they saw a conflict between this path and the first, involving the principles of religion. The *Guide* is designed to show that there are no real contradictions between the two paths and that they complement each other. Moreover, it essentially indicates that those who follow the first path must also follow the second one if they are to reach perfection.

I will continue to leave aside the question of whether the opposite is also true—namely, whether one who follows the second path, the learning of the sciences, must also follow the first. There can be no doubt that Maimonides regarded Judaism as the religion most conducive to the attainment of final perfection, but whether he thought it was absolutely necessary for all individuals engaged in this quest is far from clear. The important point is that he wrote the *Guide*, no less than the *Mishneh Torah*, as a Jew, directing his fellow Jews to perfection within the context of Judaism. Jews aspiring to perfection must know

4 See, for example, *Guide* 1.68.

and practice Jewish law, attain the fundamental beliefs of Judaism, and engage in speculation concerning them. This speculation necessarily entails a multi-year course in the sciences, in Maimonides' view.⁵ Taken together, the *Mishneh Torah* and *The Guide of the Perplexed* supply the necessary knowledge for the "Jewish" aspect of the path. For the mandatory philosophic knowledge that must be attained, Maimonides refers his students to the writings of the scientists and philosophers.

Maimonides may have seen the *Mishneh Torah* as an effective replacement of all previous works devoted to Jewish law, as he should be interpreted as indicating in his introduction to this work,⁶ but he certainly did not see the *Guide* as a substitute for the books of science and philosophy. Significantly, when one looks at the entire corpus of his writings, one finds little inclination on his part to make any substantial contributions to the philosophic path. His contributions to philosophy in the *Guide*, noteworthy as they may be in their own right, are presented in order to strengthen his readers' loyalty to the Jewish aspect of the path to perfection, as Maimonides understood it. They are not presented as independent philosophic investigations—that is, independent of an understanding of Jewish principles and teachings. Even Maimonides' non-Jewish writings—namely his medical ones—are not really concerned with knowledge that is integral to the attainment of perfection, as distinct from the philosophic writings of Aristotle and his followers. On this point, Maimonides' concerns in the *Guide* are to be distinguished from those of his illustrious fourteenth-century Jewish philosophic successor living in Provence, Gersonides, who wrote his famous treatise, *The Wars of the Lord*, to convey to his readers an understanding of Judaism precisely in those areas where he felt he also had original contributions to make in the domain of philosophy.⁷

5 *Guide* 1.34. Shen Tov Ibn Falaquera was later to describe the necessary curriculum in far more detail, together with the number of years required to complete it, in his book *The Seeker*.

6 Maimonides writes: "I called this composition *Mishneh Torah* (Repetition of the Law), for a person first reads the Written Law and afterwards reads this and knows from it the entire Oral Law, with no need for reading any other book."

7 An English translation of this treatise has been prepared by Seymour Feldman, *The Wars of the Lord*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984-1999); see Gersonides' introductory remarks in vol. 1, 87-104.

It is instructive to view the philosophic activity of the Jews of Provence from the end of the twelfth century, at the time Maimonides completed his *Guide*, to the first half of the fourteenth according to these two paths. Whereas Maimonides in his philosophic treatise, written in Arabic, could refer his readers to the vast corpus of philosophic literature, all available in Arabic, few Jews in Provence knew Arabic. At the end of the twelfth century this literature was still unavailable in Hebrew translation. One could say that the situation of the Jews in Provence was the opposite of the situation of part of the Jewish intellectual elite in Arabic-speaking countries. In the case of the latter, Maimonides addressed a group steeped in Jewish tradition, whom he wanted to read his treatise *after* they had attained also a solid grounding in the sciences. The teachings of Judaism, as they understood them, when viewed from the perspective of the physical and metaphysical sciences they had learnt, are the reason for their perplexity. The *Guide* shows them the compatibility of Judaism and science and their respective roles in the quest for perfection. The Jews of Provence, on the other hand, had to first read the *Guide* to understand that a solid grounding in the sciences is necessary for the attainment of human perfection, which is the final goal of Judaism. Maimonides himself compiles a recommended bibliography in a letter to his translator, Samuel Ibn Tibbon: Aristotle, his ancient commentators, and from the medieval philosophers—Alfarabi, Avicenna Ibn Bajja, and in a number of manuscripts of this letter, also Averroes, whose works were read by Maimonides only after he had written the *Guide*.⁸ It appears that Ibn Tibbon himself was not overly familiar with this literature. The audience for whom he was translating the *Guide* had no access to this literature at all. In short, we are dealing with a group of people who do not know that they should be perplexed

8 See Isaac Shailat (ed. and Heb. trans.), *Iggerot HaRambam* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot Press, 1988), 552-554. Shlomo Pines brings an English translation of the relevant part of the letter in the introduction to his translation of the *Guide*, "The Philosophic Sources of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," lix-lx. Doron Forte in an unpublished article discusses the different versions of this letter, the more trustworthy ones lacking any reference to Averroes, which appears to be a later addition of one of the copyists. That Maimonides read Averroes only after he wrote the *Guide* is attested to by one of his later letters to Joseph ben Judah; see *Iggerot HaRambam*, 299, 313.

until they read the *Guide*; from the *Guide* they learn that they should be, and also learn the way out of the perplexity. From their reading they would certainly conclude that learning the sciences is necessary both in order to truly understand Judaism and to attain perfection. Yet precisely on this point the Provençal reader encounters the greatest obstacle. All the recommended reading on the subject is written in Arabic and unavailable in Hebrew.

Maimonides was certainly aware of the change in the function of his treatise from the one he originally intended, given the nature of his new audience. From the guide for one who has become perplexed in matters of religion because of one's philosophical studies, the treatise assumes the role of being also the guide for understanding what knowledge is required in order to become perplexed. Guiding these new readers to perplexity in matters of philosophy because of their desire to learn Maimonides' view of Judaism becomes an inevitable step in bringing them to perfection. Maimonides' correspondence with the communities of Provence shows that he admires their intellectual curiosity, but is also aware of their lack of scientific-philosophic knowledge.⁹ He nevertheless does not discourage the translation of his treatise into Hebrew and cooperates with Ibn Tibbon in his endeavors. While in the introduction to the *Guide* he tells his elite reader that he must grasp each word in any given chapter, "for the diction of this treatise has not been chosen at haphazard" (15), he informs his translator:

Anyone who wants to translate from one language to another and who translates a given word in each instance by a single word, and who also preserves the order of what is written—will toil greatly and will produce a doubtful and faulty translation. . . . The translator from one language to another must first understand the matter, and afterwards present it in the manner appropriate to the language

9 Maimonides' remarks in his letter to astrology addressed to the Jewish community of Montpellier, for example, suggests the picture of a community striving to attain knowledge of the sciences, but which still lacks basic knowledge in this area. See Shailat, *Iggerot HaRambam*, 478-490; for an English translation of the letter see Ralph Lerner, "Maimonides' Letter on Astrology," *History of Religions* 8 (1968): 143-158.

into which it is being translated. This is impossible without changing the order of things, and translating one word by many words and many words by one.¹⁰

Maimonides' position acknowledges his readiness to compromise with an important aspect of the treatise in order to reach his new audience. He is willing to accept a situation in which the translation of the *Guide* reflects the translator's understanding of the meaning of a given sentence, and not necessarily what is the true intended meaning of each carefully chosen word. Even in its translated form, the reader of the *Guide* ascertains how important scientific-philosophic knowledge is, and that ultimately it does not conflict with Judaism but is mandated by it.

This picture enables us to understand Samuel Ibn Tibbon's activity, which sets the model for generations of Provençal scholars.¹¹ In the wake of the translation of the *Guide*, Ibn Tibbon was pressured to begin translating the philosophic works that were necessary for an understanding of the *Guide*. He chose Aristotle's *Meteorology*, since, as Maimonides pointed out in 2.30 of the *Guide*, this work is necessary for an understanding of the Account of Creation. Ibn Tibbon, who himself was interested in understanding the creation story in light of Maimonides' approach, realized his own need to study *Meteorology* (subsequently he understood the need to study other Aristotelian works to accomplish this end). By agreeing to translate this work, he could both learn the material and begin to satisfy the demands of his patrons and the scholarly community of Provence in general.¹²

So the pattern is almost set. Let me continue to expand upon this story. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, as he delved more deeply into his philosophic studies, saw the need not only to begin supplying the missing literature to his environment, but also to defend the approach to Judaism advanced by Maimonides, to expand upon it, and even to

10 Shailat, *Iggerot HaRambam*, 532.

11 See in particular Aviezer Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87-123.

12 This translation has been edited and translated into English by Resianne Fontaine, *Otot Ha-Shamayim* (Leiden: Brill, 1995). For the reasons for Ibn Tibbon's translation of this work, see her remarks in the introduction to her translation, xi-xii.

radicalize it. Ibn Tibbon grew up in Judaism. As in the case of Maimonides, and as a result of Maimonides' influence, he saw in philosophy the key to understanding Judaism and, so it would appear, the most important component of the path to perfection. Nevertheless, he did not view philosophy as a substitute for Judaism. Yet if one essentially accepts Aristotle's view of the structure of the world, as Ibn Tibbon did, Maimonides' position can be seen as too ambiguous, his philosophic understanding of fundamental Jewish issues too sketchy. One can say that Maimonides operates with a scalpel in guiding his readers to an understanding of the importance of studying philosophy, when the situation calls for a sledgehammer in Ibn Tibbon's evaluation. There is a fight ensuing for hearts and minds among the intellectual elite of Provence. The philosophic program must be presented with a clarion call rather than in whispers.¹³

One has only to consider Samuel Ibn Tibbon's most famous work, *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*. Even less than the *Guide* can it be considered a philosophic work in a formal sense. It is thoroughly a Jewish work, concerned with the exegesis of certain sections of Scripture. At the forefront of the work is the Account of the Chariot as presented in Isaiah and Ezekiel and the Account of Creation as presented by King David in Psalms (Psalms 104). This treatise in part results from Maimonides' referral to philosophic literature to understand these accounts. Ibn Tibbon is not only more explicit than Maimonides in his acceptance of Aristotelian philosophy (with strong Avicennian influences) to understand both the story of creation and the nature of the heavenly world, but is also far more expansive. He justifies his explicitness by the notion that the Gentiles possess and openly present the same wisdom that lies at the heart of the esoteric science of Judaism. Only Jews appear to now lack this wisdom as a result of esotericism. The time has come to teach these matters openly also to Jews.¹⁴ The fact that Christian circles in Provence taught Aristotelian philosophy quite

13 Significantly, the same change of attitude was taking place in the Kabbalistic circles of Provence in this period.

14 See Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, ed. Mordechai Bisliches (Pressburg: Anton Edlen v. Schmid, 1837), chap. 22, 173.

openly provides Ibn Tibbon with a model for emulation and a prod for his educational program.¹⁵

At one point Samuel Ibn Tibbon appears to break with Maimonides by arguing that the Torah was designed primarily for the masses.¹⁶ The difference between their positions, however, can be seen more as one of emphasis than substance. Ibn Tibbon adopts this position to show why the Torah must speak figuratively, when it would have been more appropriate to speak to the wise explicitly, much as Aristotle had done. Yet Ibn Tibbon, just as Maimonides, sees philosophic truths as underlying the Torah's accounts, as well as those of the Bible in general. He does not see himself as reading these truths into the Torah, but as unpacking them from the Torah. The Torah is true. One should add that another figure that provided Ibn Tibbon, and Provençal thinkers in general, with an important model for their approach to Scripture is Abraham Ibn Ezra, who combined an emphasis on the true literal meaning of the biblical text based on meticulous philological study with an understanding of the underlying philosophic and scientific notions.¹⁷

Samuel Ibn Tibbon also expands upon a task that Maimonides only started to engage in—understanding rabbinic midrash along philosophic terms. Maimonides wished to write a book devoted to this subject (*Book of Correspondence*) as he indicates both in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and in the *Guide*.¹⁸ He ultimately decided to refrain from writing it. In light of his initial intention, it is interesting to note that Maimonides brings relatively few examples of this type of exegesis in the *Guide*, though they certainly are far from absent.¹⁹ Provençal biblical commentators, starting with Ibn Tibbon, tend to bring far

15 For more on this point, see chapter 7, 246-247.

16 *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 20, 132.

17 Samuel Ibn Tibbon, however, is fairly critical of Ibn Ezra as a philosopher. Subsequent generations of Provençal scholars, starting with Moses Ibn Tibbon, became increasingly more positive in their attitude to this dimension of Ibn Ezra's commentaries.

18 See *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1. Introduction, 9.

19 One has only to look at the index of rabbinic passages found at the end of Pines's translation, 655-656, to see that Maimonides continued to view the great Sages of the Talmud, such as Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer, as philosopher-jurists. Yet it

more rabbinic material in their elaboration upon the philosophic truths found in Scripture. Following Maimonides' view, Ibn Tibbon frequently illustrates how midrashic views are really philosophic-scientific elaborations in figurative form of Scriptural accounts, which themselves figuratively express philosophic notions. Differences of opinions among the Sages in aggadic matters reflect scientific controversies, or they may reflect different perspectives for viewing the same issue. While we may say that Maimonides provides the blueprint for this type of exegesis, the Provençal commentators, starting with Ibn Tibbon, begin to build the working models.

Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim is not the only work written by Samuel Ibn Tibbon in accordance with this model. His earlier *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* provides us with yet another example.²⁰ The object of the model is to show the essential compatibility between, if not identification of, the philosophic path and the Jewish one. Its object is not only to make philosophy acceptable from a Jewish perspective, but also to show the truth of Judaism from a philosophic perspective. In short, the model is the product of a committed Jew who becomes committed to the philosophic pursuit but continues to maintain the commitment to Judaism. As already indicated, this exegetical model continued to be developed by the subsequent Jewish philosophic commentators in Provence, including members of his own family, such as Jacob Anatoli, author of the earliest book of philosophical sermons, *Malmad ha-Talmidim*.²¹

was more important for him in the *Guide* to underscore the underlying philosophic dimension of the books of prophecy.

20 This commentary was edited by James T. Robinson, who also translated much of it into English in his doctoral dissertation, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*" (PhD thesis, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 2002). The English translation of the commentary was subsequently published by him as *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). In several passages of *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, Ibn Tibbon mentions another work that he wrote dealing with the secrets of the Torah, *Ner ha-Hofes*. This work has not survived, not even in fragmentary form, and some scholars question whether he in fact completed the treatise.

21 Jacob Anatoli, *Malmad ha-Talmidim*, ed. L. Silberman (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1866). For a study of this thinker see Martin L. Gordon, "The Philosophical Rationalism of Jacob Anatoli" (PhD thesis, Yeshiva University, New York, 1974).

The two paths laid down by Maimonides to the ruler's habitation thus give rise to two literary directions in the philosophic literature of Provence. The philosophic direction lies in the translations of the Arabic philosophic and scientific literature, philosophic compendiums such as *Ruah Hen*²² and eventually larger compendiums or small encyclopedias such as *Sha'ar Ha-Shamayim*,²³ and larger encyclopedias of science such as Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera's *De'ot ha-Filosofim*.²⁴ It also later gives rise to the Hebrew commentaries on the philosophic literature increasingly available in Hebrew translation, particularly the commentaries of Averroes, as well as to independent philosophic treatises.²⁵ Many Jewish scholars not only wished to serve as middlemen but also took upon themselves the role of being actively engaged in contributing to the realms of science and philosophy. The other direction is the Jewish one, particularly philosophic commentaries on biblical literature. It is instructive to keep in mind that a good number of philosophers in Provence, from Samuel Ibn Tibbon to Gersonides, contributed to both paths—generally, however, in different compositions. Most of the compositions certainly contain both Jewish and philosophical material, but the focus is generally on one area or the other.²⁶ With this in mind I would like to turn to the crucial, yet underappreciated activity of Samuel's son, Moses Ibn Tibbon.

22 For a study of this compendium and a critical edition of it see Ofer Elior, "Ruah Hen as a Looking Glass: The Study of Science in Different Jewish Cultures as Reflected in a Medieval Introduction to Aristotelian Science and in its Later History" (PhD thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2010) (Heb.).

23 For a study of this popular encyclopedia see James T. Robinson, "Gershom ben Solomon of Arles' *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*: Its Sources and Use of Sources," in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy*, ed. Steven Harvey (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), 248-274.

24 On this encyclopedia, which has survived in manuscript but has as yet to be published, see Steven Harvey, "Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera's *De'ot ha-Filosofim*: Its Sources and Use of Sources," in *op. cit.*, 211-247.

25 For a good overview of the dissemination of scientific literature among the Jews of Provence in this period, see Gad Freudenthal, "Les sciences dans les communautés juives médiévales de Provence: Leur appropriation, leur rôle," *Revue des études juives* 152 (1993): 29-136.

26 Gersonides' *The Wars of the Lord* is a notable exception to this rule in that its focus is on both areas simultaneously. It does not attempt to offer an exhaustive summary of science and philosophy or deal with all major issues involving Jewish belief.

Moses Ibn Tibbon: His Life and Works

Among the Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, probably no one labored more than Moses Ibn Tibbon to make the philosophical and scientific literature written in Arabic accessible to the Jews of Christian Europe, whose cultural language was Hebrew. He belonged to the most famous family of translators in Jewish history. Yet while his grandfather Judah Ibn Tibbon and his father Samuel translated a relatively small amount of exceptionally important treatises that served as the foundation for all subsequent Jewish philosophy, most of them written in Judeo-Arabic,²⁷ Moses translated a veritable library of the great books of philosophy and science.

Little is known of the life of Moses Ibn Tibbon. He was born between the years 1190 and 1195, probably in Southern France. During this period his father wandered around a lot, living in Lunel, the city of his birth, Arles, Toledo, Barcelona, Alexandria, and from 1211 onwards, Marseille. It appears that in Marseille, Moses lived most of his life, and from there he moved to Montpellier in 1254, or slightly earlier. From the available evidence we can deduce that he began to engage in translation in 1244. The last dated translations we have are from 1274. His extensive translations of medical literature support the hypothesis that he, like his grandfather and father before him, was a physician by occupation.

Rather, it deals with those fundamental issues that are subject to dispute from a philosophic perspective, can be understood in different ways from a Jewish one, and which Gersonides felt he could resolve in a philosophically and religiously satisfactory manner. Another notable exception, though of a different nature, is Levi ben Avraham's *Livyat H̄en*, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

27 For a list of translations by Judah and Samuel Ibn Tibbon, see James T. Robinson and Uri Melammed, "Tibbon, Ibn," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd edition, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), vol. 19, 712-714. For Samuel's translations, see also James T. Robinson, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/tibbon/#Tra> (revised entry Feb. 10, 2010). In addition to Aristotle's *Meteorology*, Samuel translated a number of other scientific and philosophic treatises, or selections from them, from Arabic.

Around 1246 Moses arrived in Naples, where he continued to engage in translation. During this period, his two sisters lived there. One of them was married to her (and Moses') uncle (their mother's brother), Jacob Anatoli, who worked in Naples as a physician in the service of the emperor Frederick II, as well as a translator of astro-nomic and logical literature from Arabic into Hebrew. It is conceivable that Moses traveled to Naples not solely for the purpose of visiting his family but also in search of employment. In the same year, an edict was issued in Southern France forbidding Jewish doctors to administer to Christians. If we accept the hypothesis that Moses was a physician, it is clear that he lost an important source of income as a result of this edict. Nonetheless, he did not remain in Naples for long and he returned to Marseille, where he continued his work as a trans-lator, and later moved to Montpellier. Moses had two sons, Samuel and Judah.²⁸

As for Moses Ibn Tibbon's activity as translator,²⁹ he continued his father's project of making Maimonides' Arabic writings available in Hebrew by translating the *Book of Commandments*, the *Treatise on Logic* (1254), and at least a portion of the *Commentary on the Mishnah*.³⁰ Some of Maimonides' medical compositions were also translated by

28 While in Naples, Moses contracted with Bella, his other sister, an agreement of betrothal between their children—Moses' son Samuel and her daughter Biogoda. Both of them eventually married others, though Samuel later on decided to sue for breach of contract. On this strange case, see *Teshuvot Hōkḥmai Proventziyah*, ed. Abraham Schreiber (Jerusalem, 1967), 54-85; and Alfred Freimann, *The Arrangement of Betrothal and Marriage after the Completion of the Talmud* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1945), 53-56 (Heb.); and most recently, Pinchas Roth, "Legal Strategy and Legal Culture in Medieval Jewish Courts of Southern France," *AJS Review* 38 (2014): 382-389.

29 For a discussion of Moses Ibn Tibbon's translations, see Ernest Renan, *Les rabbins français du commencement du quatorzième siècle* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1877), 593-595; Mauro Zonta, *La filosofia antica nel Medioevo ebraico: La traduzioni ebraiche medievali dei testi filosofici antichi* (Brescia: Paideia, 1996), 182-188; Otfried Fraisse, *Moses Ibn Tibbons Kommentar zum Hobelied und sein Poetologisch-Philosophisches Programm—Synoptische Edition* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 40-43; See also Freudenthal, "Les sciences dans les communautés juives médiévales de Provence," 60-63.

30 Only the translation of the commentary to Mishnah Pe'ah 1.1 has survived, so it is not possible to determine how much of the commentary was translated by him.

him, such as *Regimen on Health* (1244), *Commentary on Hippocrates' Aphorisms* (1260), *On Poisons and the Protection against Lethal Drugs*, and *On Hemorrhoids*. In the area of philosophy, he translated many of Averroes' commentaries to the books of Aristotle: *Epitome of On the Soul* (1244), *Epitome of On the Heavens and the World*, *Epitome of the Meteorology*, *Epitome of On Generation and Corruption* (1250), *Epitome of Parva Naturalia* (1254, Montpellier), *Epitome of the Physics*, *Epitome of the Metaphysics* (1258), and *Middle Commentary of On the Soul* (1261). Moses did not limit himself to a translation of Averroes' works but also translated other philosophers, thereby granting them an important place in the shaping of medieval Jewish philosophy in the following generations. These treatises include Themestius' *Commentary on Book Lambda of Aristotle's Metaphysics* (1258), *Questions on Natural Science*, attributed to Aristotle (1264), Alfarabi's *Book of Principles*, more commonly known as *The Political Regime* (1273), Al-Batalyawsi's *The Book of Circles*, and Al-Tabrizi's commentary on the twenty propositions of Aristotelian physics that Maimonides brings in his opening to the second section of the *Guide*. In the field of logic, Moses translated Alfarabi's *Short Treatise on Aristotle's De Interpretatione* (1255), and Alfarabi's *Commentary on the Isagoge* by Porphyry. Basic treatises on the mathematical sciences (arithmetic, geometry and astronomy), to which Maimonides ascribed an indispensable role in preparing the student for the study of the natural and metaphysical sciences,³¹ were also translated by Moses, among them: Euclid's *Elements* with the commentaries of Alfarabi and Ibn Al-Haytham (1270), Theodosius' *The Sphere*, Al-Hassār's *Book of Demonstration and Memorization* (1271), *Isagoge* (or *Introduction to the Phenomena*) by Geminus (1246), *On the Principles of Astronomy* by Al-Biṭrūjī (1259), and Jābir Ibn Aflāh Al-'Ishbili's *Book on Astronomy* (1274). Finally, Moses translated a number of important medical treatises: Al-Rāzī's *Antidotarium* (1257), Ibn Al-Jazzār's *Provisions for the Traveller and the Nourishment for the Sedentary* (1259), Avicenna's *Poem on Medicine* with the commentary of

31 See *Guide* 1.34; 3.51.

Averroes (1260), and *Small Compendium of the Canon*, ascribed to Avicenna (1272).³²

While the treatises translated by Moses Ibn Tibbon played a crucial role in the subsequent development of Jewish philosophy—the vast majority of them survived in numerous manuscripts and many of them were eventually published—history has not been as kind to him in regard to his independent treatises. Most of them have not survived, except for a few fragments or citations.³³ The Provençal scholar Isaac de Lattes, writing in the mid-fourteenth century about the rabbis of Southern France, lists three major treatises written by Moses: “The complete sage, R. Moses Ibn Tibbon, composed great and worthy treatises, among them *Sefer Leqet Shikhehot*, *Sefer Pe’ah*, *Sefer Taninim*, and he also interpreted the Written Torah in an exceptionally wonderful manner.”³⁴ He then proceeds to mention Moses’ activity as a translator.

Let us begin with the three compositions de Lattes singles out by name:³⁵

1) *Sefer Leqet Shikhehot*. This book has not survived. Moses refers to it in his *Sefer Pe’ah*, and Nissim of Marseille mentions it in *Ma’aseh Nissim*.³⁶ From both references it is clear that this book deals with providence and good and evil, and much of its discussion is devoted to an interpretation of the relevant biblical texts. Moses refers specifically

32 For Moses Ibn Tibbon’s translations of medical writings and his terminology, see Gerrit Bos, *Novel Medical and General Hebrew Terminology from the 13th Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 47-72. Bos, it should be noted, has produced critical editions of many of these translations, together with the original Arabic and a parallel English translation.

33 See Colette Sirat, “La pensée philosophique de Moïse Ibn Tibbon,” *Revue des études juives* 138 (1979): 505-515. See also Fraisse, *Moses Ibn Tibbons Kommentar zum Hohelied*. Fraisse reedited Moses Ibn Tibbon’s *Commentary on Song of Songs* and translated it into German. In the appendix to this edition he brings transcriptions of many of the surviving fragments from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s works.

34 See Isaac de Lattes, *Sha’arei Ziyon*, in *Seder ha-Kabbalah le-Rabeinu Menahem HaMeiri*, ed. Shlomo Z. Havlin (Jerusalem-Cleveland: Makhon Ofef, 1995), 175.

35 For a fuller discussion of these compositions, see my introduction to *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, Avraham Israel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 12-35 (Heb.).

36 For the references, see *ibid.*, 15-16.

to the first treatise in this composition, suggesting that in the other treatises this work may have dealt with other subjects as well.

2) *Sefer Pe'ah*. This composition has survived, at least in part, in a single manuscript (along with a number of additional fragments and citations).³⁷ It deals with the tales and homilies of the Sages, particularly those that appear to be exceptionally far-fetched in the eyes of the intellectuals. It also brings interpretations of various biblical passages and deals with a number of scientific matters, concluding with an interpretation of the verses appearing toward the end of Ecclesiastes. In several passages, Moses refers to other compositions he wrote: *The Gate of the King*; *The Gate of the Depiction of Existence*; *The Gate of Sacrifices*; *The Gate of the Tabernacle*. The term “gate” normally indicates a section of a larger composition, thereby raising the question of whether what we know as *Sefer Pe'ah* is really only a section of a much larger composition containing these various gates. It should be noted that this work is labeled *Sefer Pe'ah* by the copyist; the name does not appear in the composition itself.³⁸ In a single manuscript page that preserves the beginning of the composition, a different copyist writes: “The Rational Interpretation of Some of the *Haggadot* from the Talmud by R. Moses ben Samuel ben Tibbon.” Moreover, the author of *Ma'ayan ha-Ganim* cites a number of passages from this treatise, referring to it as the *Interpretation of Homilies (Perush ha-Derashot)*. Moses himself refers to *The Gate of the Haggadah* in his *Commentary on Song of Songs*.³⁹

37 It has been published in *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 81-222. For a fuller discussion of this composition see my introduction there, 39-79. See also the discussion of Colette Sirat, “Les deraisons des aggadot du Talmud et leur explication rationelle: Le Sefer Péa et la rhétorique d’Aristote,” *Bulletin de philosophie médiévale* 47 (2005): 69-86. Sirat also brings a French translation of Moses Ibn Tibbon’s introduction. Some of the salient ideas in this composition will be discussed below.

38 See MS Oxford 939, 10r. The table of contents seems to have been compiled by the copyist from the composition itself, and there is good reason to believe that some material from the original composition is missing.

39 For the various references see my general introduction to *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 13-14.

The matter he mentions there, however, has no parallel in our composition, so it is uncertain whether his reference is to the same work.⁴⁰

3) *Sefer Taninim*. This short work has also survived in a single manuscript, whose first page is missing.⁴¹ It deals with the verses and homilies referring to the giant *taninim* that were brought into existence on the fifth day of creation, and which Moses Ibn Tibbon identifies with the leviathans. Most of the composition focuses on geographical matters, including the location of the place where Adam was created, the location of the Garden of Eden, and the places inhabited by Adam and his descendants after the expulsion from Eden. In this composition too Moses mentions *The Gate of the Tabernacle*, and also appears to refer to a passage in *Sefer Pe'ah*.

In addition to the three compositions mentioned by de Lattes, we know that Ibn Tibbon also wrote the following works:

4) *Commentary on Song of Songs*. This commentary has survived in a good number of manuscripts.⁴² Moses Ibn Tibbon treats this book as a philosophical allegory describing the conjunction of the human material (passive) intellect with the Active Intellect by mediation of the acquired intellect. He divides Song of Songs into three major sections: 1) 1:1–2:17, a description of the material intellect; 2) 3:1–5:1, a description of the individual of perfect intellect who achieves conjunction with the Active Intellect and immortality (one who eats from the Tree of Life); 3) 5:2–end, a description of one who succumbs to one's physical inclinations (one who eats from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil) and who will not experience eternal life. In this commentary, Moses refers to the following compositions that he wrote: *The Gate of Seven Weeks*, *The Gate of the Garden*, *The Gate of the Counting of the Omer*, *The Gate of the Haggadah*.

40 Yet, as has been pointed out above, there appears to be material missing from our composition.

41 It too has been published in *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 233-258. For a discussion of the ideas in this composition, see my Hebrew introduction there, 225-232.

42 The commentary has been published twice, once by L. Silberman (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1874), and once by Otfried Fraisse (see above, note 29).

Overall, in his surviving compositions Moses refers to *Leqet* and to eight gates: 1) *The Gate of the King*; 2) *The Gate of the Depiction of Existence*; 3) *The Gate of Sacrifices*; 4) *The Gate of the Tabernacle*; 5) *The Gate of Seven Weeks*; 6) *The Gate of the Garden*; 7) *The Gate of the Counting of the Omer*; 8) *The Gate of the Haggadah*.⁴³ *Leqet* clearly has the status of an independent treatise, but what is the status of the other compositions? Are all these “gates” parts of a larger work, as it highly unusual to refer to an independent work as a “gate,” and if they are parts of a larger work, what was its name? One possibility is that *Sefer Pe’ah* is the name of the all-inclusive work to which all these “gates” belong, including the composition on the rabbinic homilies mentioned above (*The Gate of the Haggadah?*), as well as the *Commentary on Song of Songs*, which are the only “gates” that have survived. This possibility also explains why Moses did not mention the name of the composition in the introduction to the composition we know as *Sefer Pe’ah*, which is unusual; the introduction was only intended for this particular “gate.” Yet several objections may be raised against this hypothesis. References to *The Gate of the Tabernacle* appears in both *Sefer Pe’ah* and *Sefer Taninim*. De Lattes refers to them as independent compositions, and if this is the case, they cannot contain the same “gate.” Furthermore, the *Commentary on Song of Songs* contains an extensive introduction, was copied numerous times as an independent composition, and does not appear to be a section of a larger work, though it contains references to many of the “gates” Moses Ibn Tibbon wrote. Could these various “gates” have been written originally as independent compositions that Moses subsequently decided to combine? Or perhaps he preferred to name many of his independent compositions “*The Gate of . . .*” Another possibility is that the copyists simply chose to copy the section of the larger work that interested them, and Moses indeed wrote a multi-faceted work containing different topics pertaining to Judaism. A further question concerns de Lattes’ description of Moses Ibn Tibbon’s compositions. He does not mention the *Commentary on Song of Songs* or any of the “gates,” but speaks of Moses’ interpretation of the Written

43 For the content of these “gates,” see *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 17-20

Torah. Was he referring to these various gates collectively, or was he thinking of a different composition? We shall return to these questions shortly after examining some of Moses' other compositions.

In addition to the above mentioned treatises, two others have survived that many of the copyists attribute to Moses Ibn Tibbon:

5) *Perush ha-Azharot le-Rav Shelomo Ibn Gabirol*.⁴⁴ Moses is not identified as the author in the body of the commentary, nor does the commentary contain any reference to his other compositions. Two of the copyists, however, ascribe this work to him, as does the great late fourteenth-early fifteenth-century Spanish rabbi, Shim'on ben Z'emah Duran. This composition is not solely an attempt to identify all the 613 commandments that Ibn Gabirol presents in poetic form, but also, and perhaps primarily, to present a detailed comparison between Ibn Gabirol's list of commandments and that of Maimonides. This commentary thus appears to have been written after Ibn Tibbon's translation of Maimonides' *Book of Commandments*, and its main purpose was to promulgate Maimonides' list of the commandments among Provençal Jewry by incorporating it into a commentary on the most famous of the *azharot*—a poem presenting all the commandments. In this commentary, Moses displays an impressive mastery of Jewish legal literature, in addition to knowledge of Hebrew philology.

6) *Sefer 'Olam Qatan (The Book of the Microcosm)*.⁴⁵ Many manuscripts of this composition have survived and most of the colophons identify its author as Moses Ibn Tibbon.⁴⁶ As opposed to the more famous treatise of Joseph Ibn Zaddik by the same name, Ibn Moses' treatise reflects more of an Aristotelian influence than a Neoplatonic

44 This commentary has been published in *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 279-421. For a discussion of this composition, see Avraham Israel's introduction, 261-277.

45 The book was edited by Zvi Almog, "Critical edition of Moses Ibn Tibbon's '*Olam Katan*'" (PhD thesis, Dropsie College, Philadelphia, 1966), who in his introduction traces the idea of the human being as a microcosm of the world in medieval Jewish thought.

46 *Ibid.*, 89, 119. It should be added that Levi ben Avraham cites an interpretation in the name of Moses Ibn Tibbon that has a parallel in this composition, lending further support to the view that it was indeed written by this author. See *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 21. See below, chapter 5, 132.

one, though the influence of the latter is also present.⁴⁷ The treatise deals with the three main faculties of the soul—the spiritual (rational), the vital, and the natural—divides each of them into several functions, and ascribes each of them to a different major organ in the body: the brain, the heart, and the liver. Moses points out the similarity of each of these faculties to one of the three “worlds,” or levels of existent things: the Separate Intellects, the Spheres, and the world of generation and corruption, and how each organ is similar to a different part of the world of the Spheres. He also shows how the various motions of human beings also share some similarity with the motions of the spheres.⁴⁸ While the treatise focuses almost exclusively on philosophic matters, Ibn Tibbon shows how some of these matters underlie one of the strange rabbinic homilies regarding the fallen angels Shamḥazai and Azazel.⁴⁹

He wrote two other treatises that have not survived:

7) *Sipur Toldot ha-Avot ve-Zulatam min ha-Qadmonim* (*The Account of the Descendants of the Patriarchs and Others from among the Ancients*). Moses Ibn Tibbon mentions this book toward the beginning of his *Sefer ‘Olam Qatan*: “After having written in *The Account of the Descendants of the Patriarchs and Others from among the Ancients* what appears to me, in which I alluded to the matter of the soul and what part of it may possibly survive and attain immortality . . . and I elaborated upon the account of their descendants and their many divisions, in order to reinforce this matter and confirm it in order that it be known, for many reject it—it

47 For example, Moses speaks in the treatise of the Universal Soul—a notion that he may have borrowed from Al-Batalyawsi’s *The Book of Circles*—that serves as an intermediary between the active supernal entities and the passive entities composed of the four elements, enabling each of them to receive its essence, shape, limbs, and unique appearance. See *‘Olam Katan*, 116-117.

48 For a study of another central idea of this composition, see Ottfried Fraisse, “Moses Ibn Tibbon’s Concept of Vital Heat: A Reassessment of Peripatetic Epistemology in Terms of Natural Science,” in *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives*, ed. Raphael Jospe and Dov Schwartz (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 255-278.

49 See *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 21.

being strange in their eyes and close to impossible.”⁵⁰ A further apparent allusion to this treatise can also be found in the *Commentary on Song of Songs*, where he writes: “The faculties of the soul are four: the sensitive, the imaginative, the appetitive, and the rational, and these are generally the ‘Chariot of Pharaoh,’ for it [the evil inclination] overpowers and rules them The nutritive faculty was not counted among [the faculties] of the human soul, because it is entirely natural and is found also in plants. It was also not listed among the number of wives of Jacob and their children, as I explained in its place.”⁵¹ The allegorical treatment of Jacob and his family, in which Jacob represents the intellect and each of the wives and children represent a different power of the soul, is cited in detail by Levi ben Avraham in the name of Moses Ibn Tibbon.⁵² Though Levi does not mention the name of the composition, there is little doubt that he draws his citation from this work. In this case too, the impression one gains from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s references to this work is that *Sipur Toldot ha-Avot*, *Sefer ‘Olam Qatan*, and *Commentary on Song of Songs* are all sections of a larger work and appear in it in this order.

8) *Supercommentary on Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Torah*. This supercommentary has not survived at all. We know of it from other supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra, which cite Moses Ibn Tibbon’s comments on Ibn Ezra’s views. Many of these citations are not necessarily derived from a supercommentary that he wrote, but may have been taken from one of his other lost works. Yet at least one supercommentator, Yehudah Mosconi, mentions explicitly having read a supercommentary ascribed to Moses Ibn Tibbon, of which he is critical, though occasionally he cites from it in his own work.⁵³ Whether

50 *‘Olam Katan*, 90.

51 *Commentary on Song of Songs* 1:9 (Silberman, 10a; Fraise, 229).

52 See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2014), 146-147 (Heb.). See also *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007), 716 (Heb.).

53 See Abraham Berliner, “R. Yehudah Mosconi: The Introduction to *Even ha-‘Ezer* on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Commentary on the Torah,” *Ozar Tov* 2 (1877): 8 (Heb.). For a survey of the supercommentaries written on Ibn Ezra’s Torah commentary, see in particular Uriel Simon, “Interpreting the Interpreter: Supercommentaries on

this supercommentary was in fact written by Moses, however, is not entirely clear.⁵⁴ Also unclear is whether this is the composition that de Lattes has in mind when he refers to Moses Ibn Tibbon's interpretation of the Written Torah.

Finally, there are two surviving short works that Moses Ibn Tibbon wrote:

9) Moses Ibn Tibbon's Comments on his Father's Letter to Maimonides regarding Providence.⁵⁵ While Samuel sees a possible contradiction in Maimonides' approach to individual providence, with some of his comments suggesting that this is a completely naturalistic phenomenon while others suggest that it is a supernatural one, Moses sees Maimonides positing two forms of individual providence, one belonging to the philosophers and the other to the prophets, with both of them being natural.⁵⁶ These comments either were part of an epistle or were copied from a larger work, such as *Leqet Shikhehot*.⁵⁷

10) *Answers to Queries on Physics* (also known as: *Answers to Queries on Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*).⁵⁸ This epistle has survived in a single

Ibn Ezra's Commentaries," in *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 86-128.

54 While there is no compelling reason to reject Moses Ibn Tibbon's authorship, there are at least some reasons to question it. For a discussion of this point see *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 23-25. Another early supercommentator, Solomon Ibn Yaish the Younger, also notes having seen Moses Ibn Tibbon's commentary and brings an additional citation in his name, in this case explaining Ibn Ezra's parable found in his commentary on Genesis 3:24, "From the light of the Intellect the Will is emitted . . ." Overall, the available evidence supports the view that Moses wrote a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra's Torah commentary, though this issue requires further research.

55 Samuel's letter and Moses' response were published by Zevi Diesendruck, "Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence," *HUCA* 11 (1936): 341-366.

56 See below, chapter 11, 411-415.

57 See *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 26.

58 This treatise has been analyzed in depth by Hagar Kahana-Smilansky, "Moses Ibn Tibbon's *Answers to Queries on Physics*: Sources and Problems," *Aleph* 12 (2012): 209-241.

manuscript whose copyist attributes it to Moses Ibn Tibbon.⁵⁹ It deals primarily with the motion of the four elements in light of questions asked regarding some of Samuel Ibn Tibbon's statements in *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*. The questioner, apparently a close relative, also asks why Samuel brings more than one interpretation of Jacob's ladder in his treatise, leading Moses to discuss this particular vision.

It should be added that a number of citations from Moses Ibn Tibbon can be found in the writings of subsequent thinkers, particularly Levi ben Avraham, without their mentioning, however, from which works they are taken.⁶⁰

In light of de Lattes' remarks, we are left with the question of whether Ibn Tibbon wrote a commentary on the Torah, or was de Lattes thinking of the various "gates" as collectively comprising a commentary. Moreover, did Moses intend for these "gates" to form a single encyclopedic composition, one which could have served as a forerunner for the Jewish section of Levi's encyclopedia?⁶¹ Until more evidence regarding Moses Ibn Tibbon's treatises comes to light, the answers to these questions will have to remain in the realm of speculation.

Moses Ibn Tibbon's Approach to *Aggadah*

Moses Ibn Tibbon's knowledge of Arabic and his numerous translations of philosophic and scientific treatises provided him with a solid background for the development of his own thought.⁶² He presents a

59 MS Parma 2620, 91v-99v. Kahana-Smilansky has edited the text which is scheduled to be published by Brill.

60 For some of these citations, see *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 28-33. There are also a number of surviving fragments from other works that some have attributed to Moses Ibn Tibbon, one dealing with the beginning of Maimonides' "The Laws of the Foundations of the Torah," and several containing part of a commentary on the Work of Creation. Some of these fragments are clearly not the work of Moses Ibn Tibbon, or at least there is no solid reason to assume that they are, except for one of the fragments dealing with the Work of Creation that may in fact belong to him. For a discussion of this point, see *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 33-34.

61 For a discussion of this encyclopedia, see the following chapter.

62 It should be noted that he at times cites from Arabic treatises that had not yet been translated.

number of interesting general philosophic ideas in his surviving treatises, such as in his *Book of the Microcosm*, and his approach to individual providence as discerned from his comments upon his father's epistle to Maimonides should be regarded as a significant contribution to Jewish thought.⁶³ Yet his primary contribution as a thinker is in the area of philosophic exegesis—the interpretation of Jewish sources in light of philosophic and scientific notions. He continues the project his father began, explaining the philosophic ideas concealed in King Solomon's works by writing an exceptional philosophic commentary on what is considered to be the most esoteric of them, Song of Songs. Moreover, he went much further than his illustrious predecessors in presenting in his works philosophic-scientific interpretations not only of rabbinic homilies (*midrashim*), but also tales (*aggadot*), particularly in his *Sefer Pe'ab*. In a crucial sense, *Sefer Pe'ab* (or the section we possess of it) is a pioneering work in the philosophic interpretation of this genre of literature.⁶⁴

In the introduction to this composition, Moses deals explicitly with the reasons that the Sages concealed their philosophic and scientific views by presenting them in an allegorical form. It is important to note that he does not feel that all the tales have a concealed layer, or that all the Sages were also philosophers, but in many cases such a layer indeed exists in his view. As for the reasons they concealed philosophic and scientific truths in this manner, he writes as follows:

According to the thinking of the Sages, some matters should be presented in strange parables, which cannot possibly be true according to the intelligent,⁶⁵ in order that the intelligent discern that they in fact are parables and that they contain a concealed layer, and hence they must exert themselves in order to discover their meaning. Moreover, if you inform the ignorant and the foolish of

63 See below, chapter 11, 420-421.

64 A Provençal contemporary of Moses Ibn Tibbon who also wrote a rationalistic commentary on the aggadah, but who was far less grounded in philosophy, is Isaac ben Yedaiah; for a study of his composition, see Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

65 That is, when they are understood literally.

the acts of God and His wonders as they really are, or inform them by *rational* parables of the justness of the order and God's wondrous intelligence, they will not understand and will not believe in God's ability or the goodness of His will, but will ascribe these matters to a wise and fixed nature. Therefore the Sages, that is to say, those who were true sages, thought to depict these true matters by fantastic parables that are strange and remote from what is known by the intellect as well as from nature. The ability of God and the goodness of His will are thereby increased in the eyes of the foolish, in [their belief] that God multiplied His wonders and miracles for His loved ones and those keeping His covenant. Therefore, anyone who is intelligent and has the spirit of God in him, when he sees a strange tale or saying ascribed to the Sages he should know that this matter has a concealed layer, and its strangeness is designed to astonish the foolish and to encourage the intelligent to understand what is hinted by it.⁶⁶

Moses has no doubt that the concealed layer consists of philosophic and scientific views contained in the Arabic literature. As he indicates, the main reason that these views are concealed is that they are not conducive to strengthening the masses' belief in God and divine providence—that is to say, for political-religious reasons. As Maimonides had already noted, the more absurd a midrashic view is when understood literally, the more the masses (including those rabbis ignorant of philosophy) think it as reflective of God's might.⁶⁷ The wise, on the other hand, will discern that there is a concealed layer and discover its true meaning by dedicating themselves to learning the sciences and

66 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 89-90. It is interesting to read these lines in light of Gershom Scholem's view on the difference between the approach of the philosophers and the Kabbalists to aggadah. Of the philosophers Scholem writes: "Their treatment of the Aggadah . . . is embarrassed and fumbled." Subsequently he argues: "The philosophers who had passed through the school of Aristotle, never felt at home in the world of Midrash. But the more extravagant and paradoxical these Aggadahs appeared to them, the more were the Kabbalists convinced that they were one of the keys of the mystical realm" (*Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [New York: Schocken Publishing House, 1941], 31, 32). Moses Ibn Tibbon's approach is not as distant from that of the Kabbalists as Scholem would have it. Moreover, the philosophic approach to midrash may have even played a positive role in the development of the Kabbalistic approach, but this point requires further investigation.

67 See *Guide* 2.6.

philosophy, thereby understanding the true manner in which God governs the world.

As in the case of his father, the cultural climate in Provence provided Moses Ibn Tibbon with a strong catalyst in bringing to light the truths that he thought the traditional texts of Judaism concealed. Yet while his father spoke of the scathing criticism voiced by the Christians in regard to the Jewish ignorance of the philosophic ideas underlying the words of the prophets, which prodded him to make some of these ideas public,⁶⁸ Moses focuses on their withering critique of rabbinic midrash:

Since I saw the gentile sages scheme against us by investigating the words of our tradition, and ridicule us and our holy ancestors, the authors of the Talmud, for the tales found in it are strange to the intellect and impossible by nature, despite the fact that they for the most part contain matters intended for those understanding their secrets. This [ridicule] befell us because of those among our nation who are wise in their own eyes, and pretend to be wise though they are without wisdom, who understood them [the tales] literally, just as is the case with many of the parables of Scripture and its esoteric allusions. They do not distinguish between natural matters and those brought about by way of miracle, and they do not understand the difference between the impossible, the possible, and the necessary in regard to God, and what must be negated of Him. They do not know that the way of the sages of all the nations in antiquity was to speak of the sciences in parables and riddles and to hint by way of stories what befell them, their histories, moral matters, and the sciences, and that many of their words have an exoteric and esoteric layer. Therefore I, Moses ben Samuel ben Judah ben Tibbon from Spain [lit. the pomegranate of Spain], gathered up my strength and stirred myself to explain some of them, particularly the strangest ones, and to confirm their intent, to serve as a hint and allusion to some, and to show the way to understanding others, and to speak of some of them in a way that is possible, not that I declare that it is definitely so [in accordance with my explanation].⁶⁹

The investigation of Jewish sources by Christians, in an attempt to convince the more educated Jews to convert due to the absurdity of

68 See *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 22, 175; see below, chapter 7, 246-247.

69 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 83.

many of the Talmudic tales, plays an important role in Moses' decision to devote a composition to this subject.⁷⁰ This problem is greatly aggravated, he maintains, by the tendency of many of the Jewish legal scholars in his own period to accept these stories as true in accordance with their literal meaning—a tendency that Maimonides had severely criticized in his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*. When he speaks of the approach of the sages of antiquity, Moses clearly has in mind the Platonic understanding of myths. It is important to note that not only scientific matters are on occasion presented in parable form according to him, but historical events as well.⁷¹ As we shall see below, he brings some exceptionally interesting examples of such parables from rabbinic literature.

In the continuation of his discussion, Moses addresses the problem of whether one is required to believe everything that is contained in rabbinic *aggadot*, just as one is required to accept all the commandments that are handed down in tradition and recorded in the Talmud:

Regarding the *aggadot* and stories that are written in the Talmud—whether they concern natural science and astronomy, the divine science, or matters necessary to uphold the faith, as in the case of the stories regarding reward and punishment, either during one's lifetime or after one's death, or other matters—it is not written in what manner they are to be known, or how we are to establish what is true when there are conflicting opinions [between the Sages].⁷² Furthermore, when there are no conflicting opinions, are we still required to believe everything that is written on these matters, even though they are irrational and impossible by nature when understood literally?

70 Ram Ben-Shalom has suggested in an unpublished talk that Moses Ibn Tibbon's reference may be to Pablo Christiani. Christiani, who probably was born in Montpellier, was a Jewish convert to Christianity who tried to convert his former co-religionists in Provence by his preaching. Later he moved to Aragon, and in 1263 was the adversary of Nahmanides in the Barcelona Disputation. Reports of the disputation reveal that the absurdity of many of the rabbinic homilies and tales was one of the points Christiani raised to illustrate the falseness and irrationality of Judaism.

71 Maimonides had already shown that a number of biblical parables should be understood as referring to future events; see, for example, *Guide* 2.29.

72 According to Maimonides, in matters of opinion, as opposed to matters of action, there is no room to issue a legal ruling in cases of conflict; see, for example, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10.3.

Also, there are matters that are ascribed to “Tana devei Eliyahu,” and we do not know if this is the name of the possessor of the *baraithot*,⁷³ or they are so labeled because they were received from the mouth of Elijah [the prophet] in a dream and vision of the night, or they are matters that are acquired by way of learning, logical deduction or tradition, and they are so labeled in order to conceal. We do not know if we are required to believe everything.⁷⁴

Based on Maimonides’ discussion in *Guide* 2.8, where he shows that the Sages of the Talmud deferred to the opinion of the gentile sages in matters of astronomy, Ibn Tibbon concludes that we are certainly not required to believe what the Sages said in matters of science and philosophy when no commandment or matter of faith is involved, if their opinions are irrational or when other sages demonstrated their falsehood. This is true even when the rabbinic opinion appears to follow the prophetic one. The established scientific opinion remains the preferable one.

Yet the primary purpose of this composition, as we have seen, is to show the conformity of the rabbinic views with the scientific ones to the extent that Ibn Tibbon thought possible. The interpreter should, he maintains, struggle to show how these tales reflect concealed truths. He concedes, however, that not all statements and tales should be treated in this manner—that is to say, as containing an esoteric level. Many of them should be seen as employing hyperbole in the descriptions they bring. Other tales should not be ascribed to the Sages themselves, for some of those written by non-sages were incorporated into rabbinic literature. Moses divides the tales and homilies into the following categories: some are simply stories meant for entertainment; some interpret a verse in many different ways, of which only one alludes to an esoteric truth, while the others are designed to conceal; some are presented in order to strengthen the faith or to negate a false belief in the manner that is most appropriate for the readers. In other words,

73 That is to say, a Sage from the period of the Mishnah who is responsible for transmitting these teachings.

74 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 88.

these tales are necessary for the preservation of the religion, even though they are not true.⁷⁵

One of the strangest aggadic statements discussed by Moses Ibn Tibbon is the one in BT 'Avodah Zarah 3b:

The day consists of twelve hours. During the first three God sits and devotes to Torah; during the second [three] He sits and judges the entire world. Since He sees that it merits annihilation, He gets up from the Throne of Judgment and sits on the Throne of Mercy. During the third [three] He sustains the entire world, from antelope horns to lice eggs. During the fourth [three] He sits and plays with [an alternative reading, ridicules] the leviathan, as it is said: *The leviathan you formed to play with* [Psalms 104:26].

Given the patent absurdity of this aggadah when understood literally, Moses interprets it as a philosophic parable. In his view it deals with the four stages of life, particularly of human beings. The first stage is the period of birth and growth of the entity, likened to the first three hours of the day, which are warm and moist as in the nature of Spring, the season of renewal. God studying Torah alludes to the divine wisdom that produces birth and growth of all life forms composed of the four elements, until the entity is fully formed. The next stage, likened to the second three hours of the day, alludes to the period in which the entity functions at full physical capacity and in which the food it intakes enables it to replace the bodily matter which is expended—"judgment" representing the sustaining of that which exists in an orderly, fixed manner. By the end of this period, however, most of the natural moisture the entity possessed at birth has dried up, leading to the entropy of the body, characteristic of the next period. Hence in order to continue to sustain the entity, whether it be large or small, and enable it to function with the power of all its faculties despite the weakening of the body, God must now sit on the Throne of Mercy, for everything we see deteriorating we say that it requires heavenly mercy. In the final stage, the body is weak and diminished together with all its powers, and is like naught before God, who is represented as sitting in the heaven,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 89. Ibn Tibbon also points to the different types of parables enumerated by Maimonides in the introduction to the *Guide*.

the eternal existent, and ridiculing it. Leviathan alludes to the corruption of entities, or to the evil inclination, which also weakens in old age. God ridicules it and informs it that it toiled in vain in seeking out physical pleasures. In a similar vein, Ibn Tibbon interprets the subsequent Talmudic discussion regarding God and the leviathan, and God's nocturnal activity.⁷⁶

Other strange tales, such as the story in BT Berakhot 18b of the righteous person who gave a dinar to a poor person, was forced out of his home by his wife as a result, and went to sleep in the cemetery, he also treated as philosophic parables—in this case, as one dealing with the intellect and the faculties of the soul.⁷⁷ The strange statement in BT Sukah 4b-5a that the Indwelling did not descend below ten handbreadths and Moses did not ascend above ten, is explained as having an exoteric and esoteric meaning. On the exoteric level, it indicates that Moses received his revelation in the Sanctuary between the figures of the two cherubs above the curtain of the ark, which were higher than ten handbreadths from the ground. On the esoteric level, the ten handbreadths represent the ten spheres. The statement signifies that God had no direct connection with the material world, even the world of the spheres, while the human being cannot fully grasp even the ten spheres, let alone the Separate Intellects above them, only what is below, the world of generation and corruption.⁷⁸

An example of an aggadic statement that conceals a philosophic idea precisely because it is *not* so strange, at least not at first glance, and only the wise will discern that it contains an esoteric level, Moses Ibn Tibbon discerns in BT Pesahim 54a. The passage deals with the ten things that God created on the very end of the sixth day, all of them referring to miraculous objects that will play an important role in Israel's future. While Maimonides interprets the parallel passage in Mishnah Avot 5.6 as showing the extent that the Sages tried to understand miracles as in some manner being incorporated into the order of

76 Ibid., 95-102.

77 Ibid., 196-197.

78 Ibid., 109-110.

nature at the time of creation,⁷⁹ Moses focuses on one of the things added to this list and the subsequent debate about it, which upon reflection is incongruous to the original list:

“Ten things were created [on the eve of the Sabbath] at twilight. . . . R. Judah said: tongs too.” On R. Judah’s saying “tongs too,” they [the Sages] stated: “He used to say: ‘Tongs are made with tongs, but the first tongs, who made them? Verily it was a heavenly creation.’ They said to him: ‘It is possible to make a mold and shape it simultaneously, hence it is a human creation.’” It is remarkable that R. Judah was oblivious to the fact that it is possible to make tongs in a mold or with two tiles. Hence it appears to me that R. Judah alluded to a very subtle esoteric matter and connected it to the things that were created at twilight. That is, the things that by nature are necessarily generated one from another were not necessarily created in order, the second from the first and the third from the second. For it is known to the wise and agreed upon by them that the First Cause, God the highly exalted may He be blessed, is one. He is a true unity, who is simple, separate, with no multiplicity or composition at all. All the philosophers are of the opinion that from a simple thing only a simple thing is necessitated, for the agent gives what is in itself to its effect. The Separate [Intellects] are not numerous or distinct, except by rank and causality.⁸⁰ Tongs and scissors are composed of two things, the actual existence of one is not possible without the other. They represent the matter and form in the lower world of generation and corruption, made and existing by reason of the body of the sphere and its shape. It is possible that from the aspect of the body of the sphere, which is finite, the individuals of each species are generated; and from the aspect of its circular shape and motion, which has no beginning and end, first and last, *they turn not when they go, each goes in the direction of its face* [Ezekiel 1:9]—this refers to the preservation of the species by one coming after the other, *a generation goes and a generation comes* [Ecclesiastes 1:4], whether by virtue of birth, in the case of humans and animals, by eggs, in the case of fowl and fish, or seeds, in the case of vegetation, or by parts of roots, like garlic and roses. The continuation of the species is by

⁷⁹ See *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Avot, 5.6; cf. *Guide* 2.29.

⁸⁰ That is to say, members of the same species are distinguished by their matter, since their form is the same. Since the Separate Intellects have the same form and no matter, the only way that one can be distinguished from the other is by rank, which is determined by the distinct level of knowledge of each of them, or by the fact that one is the cause of the other.

means of the individuals of the species, in accordance with its period [of existence] in time and the end of its motion, rising and descending. But “the first tongs,” which are the body of the sphere and its shape, “who made them”—how do they come about by reason of the Separate Intellects, and how did they derive from them and their power? This is not possible from the aspect of natural necessity. Therefore, the world is created by virtue of [divine] will, and His will has no mover and cause, unlike the will of a human being, as it is said: *My thoughts are not your thoughts* [Isaiah 55:8]. Heaven forbid that one should say that the sphere, which is the Throne of Glory, is without beginning, as the Sages said that the Torah and the Throne of Glory antedated the work of creation.⁸¹ Rather, the Throne and His Footstool belong to the things that are inseparably joined together, like the circle and its center.⁸² The reason that “the first tongs” are connected to the things that were created on the twilight of the end of the six days of creation is because they are not necessitated by natural necessity—a thing that is necessitated by what preceded it and its being the reason for it⁸³

The view of R. Judah regarding the existence of the first tongs, according to Ibn Tibbon, in effect is an argument for the doctrine of creation. Based on Maimonides’ discussion in *Guide* 2.22, Ibn Tibbon points out that natural necessity cannot account for the origin of the spheres—to which R. Judah alludes when he speaks of the first tongs—for according to the philosophers, only a simple thing can proceed from a simple thing. The existence of the spheres thus must be the product of divine will, even though the Separate Intellects are their immediate cause. Moreover, since the existence of the spheres and the earth are inseparable, they must have come into existence at the same time. This view is tied by R. Judah to the list of miracles implanted in creation, Ibn Tibbon explains, since they too could not have come about as a result of natural necessity alone, but they reflect the workings of divine will.

While Moses Ibn Tibbon’s philosophic interpretations of some of the rabbinic homilies and tales display a high degree of ingenuity, more

81 See BT Pesahim 54a; cf. Genesis Rabbah 1.4.

82 The Torah represents the Separate Intellects, the Throne represents the spheres, and the Footstool represents the earth. Moses Ibn Tibbon argues that the spheres and the earth are inseparably linked, so one cannot exist before the other in time, though the former is the cause of the latter.

83 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 93-94.

novel are his historical interpretations. A good example of this is his fascinating explanation of the tale in BT Berakhot 54b involving the stone thrown by Og upon Moses:

“One who sees the stone that Og, the king of Bashan, threw upon Moses”⁸⁴ The object mentioned in this *baraita* is possibly a large stone thrown by Og upon Moses, or many stones thrown upon the camp of Israel, “stone” representing many stones and “Moses” representing all of Israel. These are stones used as projectiles or stones thrown from belfries, thus they said “stone” and not “mountain.” . . . “He [Og] said: How large is the camp of Israel? Three parsangs. I will go and uproot a mountain that is three parsangs and throw it upon them and kill them. He went and uprooted a mountain that was three parsangs” etc. until the end of this tale in the Talmud, up to “[don’t read] ‘You broke’ [Psalms 3:8], but ‘You stretched.’” The literal meaning of this story is very strange, far removed from nature and reality, and something that the intellect cannot accept, that such a thing was within the power of human beings, let alone God’s enemies, even by way of a miracle. The Talmud, however, understood this story as involving a powerful king or noble, who was to help him [Og], as it is said: *The stone rejected by the builders has become the chief cornerstone* [Psalms 118:22], and as it is said: *Who are you great mountain . . . and he shall produce the headstone* [Zechariah 4:7].⁸⁵ Thus they interpreted the meaning of “he threw upon Moses”—“that he wanted to throw.”⁸⁶ His saying: “How large is the camp of Israel? Three parsangs”—that is to say, how many belong to this nation that occupies an area of three parsangs? I will bring upon them a great king whom I will transfer and transport from his place, one whose army and camp are greater than the camp of Israel, and with his help we will defeat Israel and destroy them. The saying: “[He uprooted a mountain that was three parsangs] and placed it on his head”—he [Og] accepted him [the powerful king] as a sovereign and submitted himself and his kingdom to him to pay him corvée, as is the way of every noble who has a stronger enemy. “And God

84 Ibn Tibbon had a slightly different version of this passage, and my translation is in accordance with his version and not with our printed texts.

85 “Stone” and “mountain” represent exceptional human beings.

86 In our versions the *baraita* reads: “The stone that Og, the king of Bashan, wanted to throw upon Israel” (BT Berakhot 54a), and in the subsequent citation the same wording is used (54b). In Moses Ibn Tibbon’s version, the wording was: “The stone that Og, the king of Bashan, threw upon Moses,” and in the subsequent citation: “The stone that Og, the king of Bashan, wanted to throw upon Moses,” leading him to comment upon the story in the manner he does.

brought upon him locusts, which bore into the mountain, and it fell upon his head.” That is to say, in the city to which the king and his great army gathered in support of Og, God brought about a quarrel between them. As to the saying: “God brought upon him”—a thing that comes to fulfill God’s will, or to change and annul what is against the will of God, whether it is something volitional or natural or accidental, is [considered to be] sent by God, the Master of great deeds. They used the word *qamza*, which means locust, to hint at the swiftness of its coming, hopping and skipping. In the manner that a person can carry a mountain of three parsangs, it is possible that there be a locust that bore into the place [in the mountain] where his head was.⁸⁷ Moreover, this is many more times the measure of the base of his foot to his ankle, even though this measure was 30 cubits.⁸⁸ Maybe this is the measure [from the ground] up to the place which he stood on his chariot in the wooden tower from which he was accustomed to make war, which then does not contradict the verse: *his height was nine cubits* [Deuteronomy 3:11], where it is specified, *the cubit of a man*. Perhaps the term *qamza* is used equivocally, referring to avarice and stinginess, in that his [Og’s] heart was divided on the matter of the expenses he no longer wanted to bear. Or the intent is that a small group of gossipers (*qumza rekhilim*) stirred up a quarrel between them, or a fierce controversy. Their saying: “it bore into”—it destroyed the union and love that was between them . . .⁸⁹

The mythic tale that the Sages tell in regard to the war between the Israelite and Og is interpreted by Ibn Tibbon in terms of wars in the feudal world, with which he was familiar—nobles pledge fealty to kings in order to help them against their enemies in exchange for forced labor, constant quarrels between allies, siege towers to breach fortresses, etc. The stone Og threw is treated by Ibn Tibbon as an actual stone that commemorated Og’s defeat, as evidenced by the *baraita* that speaks of one praising God when seeing it. The mountain Og uprooted, on the other hand, is a metaphor referring to a powerful king to whom he turned and pledged fealty in exchange for help in his war against Israel. All the fantastic details of the story are explained accordingly. What

87 Hence it is absurd to understand the story literally.

88 According to the continuation of the story, Moses stood ten cubits, and he took an ax that was ten cubits and jumped up ten cubits, striking Og in his ankle and killing him. This means that Og’s height up to his ankle was thirty cubits. Yet for him to carry a mountain of three parsangs, the height would have had to be much greater.

89 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 191-192.

appears at first glance as a mythic story is transformed by Ibn Tibbon into a historical account, with the situation prevalent in his own period providing him with the key to understanding this rabbinic tale.⁹⁰

Another exceptionally strange tale Moses Ibn Tibbon explains in a very down to earth manner is the one found in BT Baba Batra 58a, which reads as follows:

R. Bana'ah used to mark out caves [where there were dead bodies]. When he came to the cave of Abraham, he found Eliezer, the servant of Abraham, standing at the entrance. He said to him: What is Abraham doing? He replied: He is sleeping in the arms of Sarah, and she is looking fondly at his head. He said: Go and tell him that Bana'ah is standing at the entrance. Said [Abraham] to him: Let him enter; it is well known that there is no passion in this world. So he went in, surveyed the cave, and came out again. When he came to the cave of Adam, a voice came forth from heaven saying: You have beholden the likeness of my likeness, my likeness itself you may not behold. But, he said, I want to mark out the cave. The measurement of the inner one is the same as that of the outer one [came the answer]. . . . R. Bana'ah said: I discerned his two heels and they were like two orbs of the sun. Compared with Sarah, all other people are like a monkey to a human being, and compared with Adam Eve was like a monkey to a human being, and compared with the Shechinah Adam was like a monkey to a human being.⁹¹

Again drawing from the social reality with which he was acquainted, Moses explains this story as follows:⁹² R. Bana'ah was an artist in the business of decorating crypts for the dead. He once found himself in a house belonging to a person named Abraham, which contained a vault possessing exceptional ancient works of art, and he was interested in a

90 A similar approach based on feudal reality characterizes Moses Ibn Tibbon's explanation of the Talmudic statement in Gittin 57a regarding the three hundred towns belonging to King Yannai; see *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 193-194. In his *Sefer Taninim*, he explains the strange tale in BT Baba Batra 74b of the male and female leviathans, the former castrated by God and the latter killed by God and preserved for the righteous in the future, as referring to past and future events occurring to the peoples living to the North and to the South of the Mediterranean Sea; see *ibid.*, 233-237.

91 As translated by Isidore Epstein for the Soncino edition of the Talmud.

92 In this case too, Moses Ibn Tibbon's version of the story is slightly different from the version in our printed editions.

description of them. He asked Eliezer, the servant in charge, about the vault, who answered that the entrance contained a depiction of the patriarch Abraham lying on the arms of Sarah as she looks down upon his head. R. Bana'ah had a professional interest in seeing this fresco with his own eyes so that he could retain a picture of it in his mind in order to duplicate it. He sent the servant to ask his master for permission to enter, which he was given. He saw that their pose was an immodest one, leading him to criticize the depiction, particularly insofar as it was created in a period known for its modesty. Nevertheless, as was only natural, he wanted to see more of the artwork, and he reached a room where there was a beautiful depiction of Adam. He is told that he may not see the picture, which no one can reproduce due to its great beauty, and even this picture does not do justice to the beauty of Adam when he was alive. In this manner Moses Ibn Tibbon continues to interpret the story, concluding with a discussion of the possible motivations of the ancients who made these beautiful yet immodest representations—either as a memorial or perhaps even to arouse sexual desire.⁹³ In short, an incredible story depicting the viewing of our biblical ancestors as still alive and dwelling in some cave is transformed into a tale of the artist who discovers an ancient treasure grove, not unlike such vaults that Moses had heard about in his own time. He is aware, however, that for all its ingenuity, his explanation is not entirely satisfactory. It contains nothing ennobling or thought provoking that would explain why the story was included in the Talmud. For this reason he adds: “If he [the story teller] spoke by way of wisdom, the enlightened one should attempt to find its meaning.”⁹⁴ That is to say, perhaps the story is in fact a parable concealing philosophic truths, though Moses Ibn Tibbon himself does not make any attempt at such an explanation. For him it is sufficient to show that this story can be understood almost literally once one discerns what it is really describing.⁹⁵

93 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 198-201.

94 *Ibid.*, 200. See below, chapter 5, 144-145.

95 Compare his explanation of the story of Abba Saul, who entered the thigh bone of Og (BT Niddah 24b), which he treats as part of a giant ancient statue; see *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 197-198.

Some Additional Matters in Moses Ibn Tibbon's Writings

The social situation with which Moses Ibn Tibbon was familiar in his own time also plays a role in his explanation of some of the commandments. The release of inadvertent killers from the cities of refuge with the death of the High Priest, for example, is likened to the amnesty granted at the time of the death of a king—a practice that Moses views as an ancient one, at times with even murderers being pardoned and released.⁹⁶ His explanation of the reason why a person who sells his house in a walled city has only a year in which to redeem it is the need to insure that only those with means would own houses there due to the high general expenses to keep up the fortifications of the city and prepare it for siege, when it can serve also as a place of refuge for the surrounding population. A person who sells for reasons of poverty and can no longer help defray these expenses will not be able to redeem his house within a year, and it would be best if it passes permanently into the possession of a wealthy person, while a rich person who sells for whatever reason might decide to redeem it and is given this opportunity. For a similar reason, Ibn Tibbon maintains that the people living in the city should not be renters but only owners, since one who rents feels he has less of a stake in contributing funds to the defenses of the city.⁹⁷

In addition to the social reasons Moses adduces for some of the commandments, he also sees naturalistic reasons as playing a prominent role in many of them. In his view, the strict laws pertaining to leprosy are due to its being a highly contagious disease. The different forms of impurity identified in the Torah in fact greatly contaminate the air and the surrounding objects, hence the stringent commandments pertaining to them.⁹⁸ Ibn Tibbon also ascribes astrological reasons to some of the commandments.⁹⁹

On occasion, Moses takes the opportunity to criticize certain practices in his own time. For example, he attacks many of his fellow

96 *Ibid.*, 181.

97 *Ibid.*, 172-173.

98 *Ibid.*, 147-148.

99 *Ibid.*, 138.

physicians for not engaging in preventive medicine, but being more concerned with maximizing their fame and fees, at times even prolonging the patient's illness to increase them. Many judges are seen by him as favoring the rich and even helping them out with their claims, instead of being impartial. Only the philosophers, the seekers of truth, behave in a moral manner in his view.¹⁰⁰

Even though Moses Ibn Tibbon possessed a highly critical rational mind, as evidenced by his interpretation of traditional literature, he, like most of his contemporaries, was far from immune to a fascination with tales of exotic, faraway places. Some of the most popular books of this genre are collections of tales purportedly reporting the travels of Alexander the Great during his conquests, commonly termed the *Alexander Romance*. The earlier collections were written in Late Antiquity and later collections in the Middle Ages. Moses was acquainted with a Hebrew translation of one of these collections.¹⁰¹ Despite the strangeness of many of the places and people described, he saw no reason to question the historicity of these tales. Furthermore, some of these tales provided him with an insight for interpreting a number of the early stories in the Torah.

After dealing with the location of the Garden of Eden and giving its geographic coordinates—which he locates in the area of Mount Kilimanjaro, or *Lunes Montes* in Latin (and in Hebrew, *Har ha-Yareah*)¹⁰²—Moses discusses the climatological traits of this region and its effects on the inhabitants. According to his view, the garden occupies a huge area straddling both sides of the equator, and is

100 Ibid., 150.

101 The version known to Moses Ibn Tibbon was translated from the Arabic, though the original was probably in Latin. Some maintain that the Hebrew translator was his father Samuel. This version was published by Israel Halevi, "Sefer Toldot Alexander," *Kobez al Jad* 2 (1886): 1-53. In his introduction on pages v-xvi, Halevi discusses the sources of this composition. This version was republished with notes by Joseph Dan, *Alilot Alexander Moqedon* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1969). A different medieval Hebrew version of the *Alexander Romance* was published with introduction and notes by Israel J. Kazis, *The Book of the Gestes of Alexander of Macedon* (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1962).

102 See *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 237-238; cf. Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Genesis* 2:11.

watered by the sources of the Nile. It is cut off from the surrounding regions by mountains and desert, possesses an ideal climate—temperate throughout the year—and lush vegetation. No iron is to be found there, so no work implements can be made, and the inhabitants live off the food of the land. The heat of the region weakens the natural bodily heat, which in turn affects the character traits of the inhabitants, making them more lethargic, less courageous, and more humble—not seeking greatness, pleasures, and dominion—as opposed to the traits of those who live in colder climes. In support of this picture, Ibn Tibbon cites the account of Alexander’s travels in which he came upon groups of people who live in similar climatic conditions. They ate only what naturally grew from the soil and no meat, wore almost no clothes except for covering their private parts with fig leaves, built no homes and slept in caves, possessed no iron, sought no physical pleasures, and lived in perfect harmony with each other, having no need for judges and police, and were exceptionally healthy, having no need for doctors.¹⁰³ While there is some confusion in Ibn Tibbon’s account, as well as in his source, whether this place was in India or Africa¹⁰⁴—and thus may be the region of the original Garden of Eden—it is clear that he sees in it the key to understanding much of the biblical story. He also cites from Alexander’s account of an adjacent region,¹⁰⁵ where Alexander beheld strange fantastic plants, of beautiful appearance and possessing a wonderful fragrance, which killed a person who touched them. Upon the trees were extraordinary

103 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 238-240; cf. ‘*Alilot Alexander Moqedon*, 89-96.

104 In Moses Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew source, it is fairly clear that the account is of Alexander’s travels in India. It speaks of two groups there, the “naked ones” and the Brahmins, with the traits described here belonging to the Brahmins, though the “naked ones” share many of the same traits. Yet the Hebrew source also speaks of this area as containing the Pishon River, which is said to flow into the Nile. Ibn Tibbon appears to favor the African location of this account, and that the traits described here belong to the “naked ones.” Yet he speaks also of the Brahmins in the same context, who live in an area not so far away, and who appear to possess the same traits. He also indicates that Alexander exchanged letters with them in Hindi. For more on medieval Hebrew descriptions of the Brahmins, see David Flusser, *Sefer Yosifon* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1981), vol. 2, 216-236.

105 This is the region that separated the land of the “naked ones” and the land of the Brahmins.

birds that made melodic sounds, and when they flew a burning wind issued forth from them that burned all that was below.¹⁰⁶ In these birds, Ibn Tibbon sees a possible explanation of the identity of the cherubs that God placed at the entrance to the garden.

For all his indebtedness to Maimonides, Moses Ibn Tibbon is much more concerned with explaining in naturalistic terms the literal level of the story of the Garden of Eden, rather than the esoteric.¹⁰⁷ He certainly does not deny the esoteric level of the story—his *Commentary on Song of Songs* is in large part based on the esoteric meaning of this story and there are also allusions to this level in his discussion in *Sefer Taninim*—but his tendency is to show that even much of the literal level is true. Moreover, there is an integral relation between the literal level and the esoteric one. The moment Adam no longer heeded the divine command and no longer acted according to his natural traits—those that were possessed by the groups that Alexander encountered—but chose instead to pursue extraneous pleasures, then he could no longer remain in this region, which was unsuited for satisfying his new desires. Nor could he later return to it because of the great dangers involved in the journey. Subsequent biblical history highlights the traits acquired by human beings, and that the lands to which they wandered were more suitable from a climatological perspective for these traits. Living closer to the sea, for example, allowed for the import of goods to satisfy the pursuit of pleasure. The metaphorical Adam, Maimonides' figure of pure intellect who loses his perfection when he turns to concentrating on physical matters, mirrors for Ibn Tibbon the historical Adam. Adam was created with an ideal temperament and lived in a physical environment best suited for it. Yet he is tempted to seek extraneous pleasures, and as a result can no longer live in a natural, perfect harmony with his surroundings or with others.

Many more examples can be adduced from the writings that have survived of Moses Ibn Tibbon's naturalistic and novel interpretations

106 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 239-240.

107 For an in-depth study of Maimonides' account, see in particular Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1986) (Heb.).

of stories in biblical and rabbinic literature, as well as his insights into some of the central theological issues of Judaism. While he has gone down in history for being a prime mold of subsequent Jewish philosophy in wake of his activity as a translator, he certainly deserves to be better appreciated as a major pioneering philosophical exegete as well, one who contributed much to the development of this approach for the understanding of Judaism.



Levi Ben Avraham and His Encyclopedia of Philosophy and Judaism, *Livyat Hen*

Introduction

Over 700 years ago, a Jew of Southern France decided to write an encyclopedia in Hebrew, an extraordinary undertaking by any measure. His name was Levi ben Avraham, and the name he gave his treatise is *Livyat Hen*.¹ The decision to write a composition of this nature was probably influenced in part by the growing popularity of encyclopedias of science and philosophy in the Latin world in this period, as well as the fact that such encyclopedias were common in the Arabic world,² though other considerations played a more dominant role, as we shall see momentarily. He completed a shorter version of his encyclopedia sometime

1 The name of the composition is taken from Proverbs 1:9 and serves as a reminder of the name of the author. For an overview of Levi ben Avraham's work, and the scholarly literature dealing with it, see Warren Harvey, "Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche's Controversial Encyclopedia," in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias*, ed. Steven Harvey (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 171-188.

2 On a number of these encyclopedias, see Johannes B. Voorbij, "Purpose and Audience: Perspectives on the Thirteenth Century Encyclopedias of Alexander Neckam, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Thomas, Thomas of Cantimpré and Vincent of Beauvais," in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias*, 31-45; Hans Hinrich Biesterfeldt, "Medieval Arabic Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy," in *ibid.*, 77-98.

after the year 1276, probably in Montpellier. He continued to revise it and produced a longer version in 1295 in Arles. Levi was not the first Jew to engage in such an undertaking; Jews began writing encyclopedias of science in Hebrew in the first half of the twelfth century.³ Nevertheless, Levi's composition is in a crucial respect unique. While some of the earlier Hebrew encyclopedias of science touch also upon topics in Jewish theology, Levi's treatise is the first we know of that offers an in-depth account of both science and Judaism in a single work.⁴

The general introduction to *Livyat Hen*, in which Levi undoubtedly revealed his reasons for writing this composition, is unfortunately lost. However, we do have the introduction to the encyclopedic poem he completed in 1276, *Batei ha-Nefesh ve-ha-Leḥashim*, which heralded and was designed to promote his later composition.⁵ In this introduction, he writes as follows:

I saw that we possess no comprehensive composition that includes in one book all that is desired by one who wishes to arrive at the truth in ease; for the many sciences that he must first attain to reach the precious and lofty science weighs heavily upon him, leaving him for a long time in a state as though lacking a true God and pure faith.⁶

3 The earliest one that we have some information about is Abraham Bar Ḥiyya's *Yesodei ha-Tevunah u-Migdal ha-Emunah*. On this encyclopedia, see Mercedes Rubio, "The First Hebrew Encyclopedia of Science: Abraham Bar Ḥiyya's *Yesodei ha-Tevunah u-Migdal ha-Emunah*," in *ibid.*, 140-153.

4 Bar Ḥiyya intended to include Jewish subjects in addition to scientific ones, but he apparently never completed his encyclopedia. An encyclopedia that appeared well before *Livyat Hen* and included Jewish subjects is *Midrash ha-Hokhmah*, but its discussion of Judaism can hardly be called extensive and it comprises only a small part of the work. On this encyclopedia, see Resianne Fontaine, "Judah ben Solomon ha-Cohen's *Midrash ha-Hokhmah*: Its Sources and Use of Sources," in *op. cit.*, 191-210.

5 For the parts that were published, see below. The entire poem was published in a private publication, whose editor unfortunately ignored the wise words of Ben-Sira: "Seek not things that are too hard for you. . . . You have no business with the things that are secrets" (Ben-Sira 3:21-22). In addition to these two compositions, Levi also wrote a polemic against Christianity that is lost, though some of the material undoubtedly was incorporated in his polemic against Christianity in *Livyat Hen*; see below.

6 Israel Davidson, "L'introduction de Lévi Ben Abraham a son encyclopédie poétique *Baté Ha-Néfeš Weha-Leḥašim*," *Revue des études juives* 105 (1940): 90.

Without doubt the “precious and lofty science” is the divine science, or metaphysics, and Levi wrote his encyclopedia to meet what he regarded as a great need—namely, a systematic presentation in a single composition of all the knowledge required to understand Judaism properly (which for Levi essentially means Maimonides’ approach to Judaism as presented in the *Guide*) and to attain human perfection. In a sense, more than any other single literary creation in Provence, *Livyat Ĥen* embodies and attempts to bring to fruition Maimonides’ pedagogical program.

While Levi’s majestic composition never achieved widespread popularity, neither was it completely ignored. On one hand, reports of some of the views and interpretations presented in this treatise aroused the ire of the Rashba (R. Shlomo Ibn Adret). He singled out Levi for condemnation in the letters accompanying his ban in 1305 against the study of philosophy prior to the age of twenty-five and against philosophical allegorical preaching, labeled him and anyone who possesses his writings heretics, and ordered his works burned.⁷ On the other hand, the Provençal scholar Isaac de Lattes, writing in the mid-fourteenth century about the rabbis of Southern France, describes Levi in glowing terms: “The great sage R. Levi ben R. Avraham ben R. Ĥayyim was erudite in every area of knowledge and composed awesome and wondrous treatises, among them the noble treatise *Livyat Ĥen*, an

7 The letters dealing with the controversy leading to Rashba’s ban, including those pertaining to Levi, were compiled by one of the key players in this whole affair, Abba Mari of Lunel, in his *Sefer Minḥat Qena’ot*. The book appears in *Teshuvot HaRashba*, ed. Haim Z. Dimitrovsky (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990); see particularly 374-375, 537-548, 667-674, 732-738. For an overview of this controversy, see Joseph Sarachek, *Faith and Reason: The Conflict over the Rationalism of Maimonides* (New York: Bayard Press, 1935), 167-264. For a study of the reasons for the condemnation of Levi, see Abraham S. Halkin, “Why was Levi ben Hayyim Hounded,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 34 (1966): 65-76; see also below. Rashba’s prior attacks on Levi already had an adverse effect on Levi’s social and economic situation, insofar as they led to his being ejected in 1303 from the house of Samuel Sulami in Perpignan, where he was staying. Levi made his livelihood from tutoring in a wide range of subjects.

exceptionally noble and precious work, whose merit is known only to the few.”⁸

The Structure of *Livyat Hen* and Its Sources

Levi divided his composition into two “pillars,” naming them after the two pillars in the Temple of Solomon, “Akhin” and “Boaz.” The first pillar is a general philosophic one consisting of five sections: logic,⁹ mathematics, astronomy, natural science, and metaphysics. Nothing has come down to us from the first section, or from the section on the natural sciences, and very little from mathematics (a single fragment dealing with geometry, which apparently is a subsection of this section). Of metaphysics we possess a lengthy portion of the latter part of this section.¹⁰ Only the section on astronomy (together with astrology) exists in full and it is quite lengthy, testifying to the great length of this pillar in its entirety.¹¹

The second pillar of *Livyat Hen*, “Boaz,” focuses on Judaism.¹² This pillar is divided into two sections: the first consisting of the following subsections: Introduction (dealing mostly with ethics), Part 1: Prophecy and the Secrets of the Law (*Sodot ha-Torah*)—this part deals with prophecy, reasons for the commandments, and the biblical stories of the patriarchs and Moses.¹³ Part 2: The Secrets of the Faith (*Sitrei*

8 Isaac de Lattes, *Sha'arei Ziyon*, in *Seder ha-Kabbalah le-Rabeinu Menaḥem HaMeiri*, ed. Shlomo Z. Havlin (Jerusalem-Cleveland: Makhon Ofeq, 1995), 178.

9 No fragment has survived of this section, but Levi refers to it in the first chapter of the first part of treatise six, “The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah.”

10 This part has been published as an appendix in Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013), 207-267 (Heb.).

11 See Gad Freudenthal, “Sur la partie astronomique du Liwyat Hen de Lévi ben Abraham ben Hayyim,” *Revue des études juives* 148 (1989): 103-112. This section alone spans 315 folio pages in the one complete manuscript we possess that contains it.

12 The appendix below brings the table of contents of this pillar. For a description of this pillar and the extant manuscripts, see Colette Sirat, “Les différentes versions du Liwyat Hen de Lévi ben Abraham,” *Revue des études juives* 102 (1963): 167-177.

13 See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007) (Heb.).

ha-Emunah)—among the topics this part deals with are divine attributes, names of God, divine worship, free will, creation, miracles, providence and reward and punishment.¹⁴ Part 3: Work of Creation—in addition to the story of creation at the beginning of Genesis and rabbinic homilies devoted to this story, this part deals also with the story of the Garden of Eden and the stories of the early generations of humanity.¹⁵ The second section of this pillar has two parts: Work of the Chariot¹⁶ and The Gate of Haggadah,¹⁷ which is devoted to showing how the leading Talmudic Sages were engaged in the study of science, and how scientific and philosophic ideas underlie many of the rabbinic homilies and tales. This pillar has survived in its entirety, either in the long version, the short version, or both.

As indicated above, prior to completing the first version of his encyclopedia Levi wrote an encyclopedic poem of over 1800 verses in rhymed meter, which he named *Batei ha-Nefesh ve-ha-Leḥashim*. He divided this poem into ten sections, in addition to an introduction.¹⁸ These sections essentially cover the same areas he deals with in his encyclopedia, and are as follows: moral virtues;¹⁹ types of syllogisms; the work of creation;²⁰ the soul and its faculties;²¹ prophecy;²² the work

14 See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Ḥen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2014) (Heb.).

15 See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of Creation*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2004) (Heb.).

16 See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of the Chariot*.

17 See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Ḥen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*.

18 As noted above, the introduction was published by Israel Davidson in *Revue des études juives* 105 (1940): 80-94. Davidson also notes the number of verses in each section.

19 This section was published by Israel Davidson, "The First Treatise of the Book 'Baté Ha-Néfeš Weha-Leḥašim'," *Studies of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry* 5 (1939): 3-42 (Heb.).

20 This section was published by me together with all the commentaries in *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of Creation*, 423-452.

21 Part of this section was published by Dov Schwartz, "The Commentary of R. Solomon ben Menaḥem to 'Batei ha-Nephesh ve-ha-Leḥashim' on the Subject of the Intellect," *Kobez al Yad* 13[23] (1996): 299-330 (Heb.).

22 This section was published by me together with all the commentaries, the first part in *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 909-967, and the

of the chariot;²³ arithmetic and geometry;²⁴ astronomy and astrology; the natural sciences; the divine science. The presentation of complex scientific and philosophic ideas, as well as philosophic interpretations of Jewish sources, in poetic form is an exceptionally challenging task. It is no wonder that Levi experienced a crisis in his attempt to write the poem, and only succeeded to do so when he was granted what he depicts as a form of divine inspiration:

I was horrified by the notion that this task was too great for me—I, of slumbering ideas, confused of thought—and was much alarmed in my mind that I could not do it, till I fell asleep with a burdened heart and in a state of perplexity. I then saw a person who spoke to me and aroused me, as a person who is aroused from his sleep. He said to me: Son of Man, awake! Arise and be strong in this task, and do not fear. Attain the desires of your heart, do what is in your soul and you will succeed. In the thirty-sixth year of creation²⁵ I was startled, and as I gazed God placed the words in my mouth. He stirred my heart, aroused my spirit, strengthened me by His word, and granted me courage to compose a short treatise that included the roots of wisdom and its principles.²⁶

While writing the poem presented great difficulties, understanding it was also far from a simple task. Levi was well aware of the problems its readers would experience in grasping many of the philosophical and scientific allusions, leading him to write a commentary on his own poem. Subsequently three other commentaries were written, one by Solomon ben Menahem and the other two by anonymous authors. The poem and the commentaries (which often cite *Livyat Hen*) are of particular importance in allowing us to gain a clearer idea of the material included in the missing sections of Levi's encyclopedia.

second part in *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 343-422.

23 This section was published by me together with all the commentaries in *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, 271-297.

24 This section was published by Israel Davidson, "Levi ben Abraham ben Hayyim: A Mathematician of the Thirteenth Century," *Scripta Mathematica* 4 (1936): 57-65.

25 That is, the year 5036 (1276).

26 See Davidson, "L'introduction de Lévi Ben Abraham a son encyclopédie poétique Baté Ha-Néfeš Weha-Lehašim," 86-87. This introduction is in rhymed prose.

Levi is neither an original philosopher nor does he pave any new paths for biblical exegesis. He is an encyclopedist, whose knowledge of philosophic-scientific literature on one hand and traditional Jewish literature on the other is truly astounding. While Levi repeats the same basic ideas frequently in his exegesis of biblical and rabbinic literature, he does so by employing a multitude of ingenious variations based on his thorough knowledge of the Bible, earlier biblical commentators—particularly Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and Radak (R. David Kimhi)—the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud, numerous midrashic compilations, all the works of Maimonides, the classic works on Hebrew grammar, and his exceptional knowledge of scientific-philosophic (including geographic and medical) literature. Levi assumes that most of his readers are not adequately familiar with the scientific and philosophic literature—hence the need for the first pillar. At the same time he presupposes that they, like him, are totally at home in the world of biblical and rabbinic literature. Often in support of one of his ideas he simply points to a rabbinic allusion without further explanation or elaboration, based on the assumption that his readers are familiar with it and thus will understand the point he is making. After encountering so many different citations from biblical and rabbinic literature that are interpreted from a philosophic-scientific perspective, the reader is swayed to believe that this is in fact the intent of the traditional sources. There is an advantage in saying with a dozen citations what could just as easily have been said employing one or two. There is an advantage in writing a comprehensive work detailing the philosophic-scientific underpinnings of the traditional texts, rather than bringing just a number of examples. Is not the deep impression that a work is meant to leave on its readers, in addition to all the knowledge it imparts, an important part of the Jewish philosophic program of how Judaism should be understood?

Aside from Maimonides' dominant influence on Levi's approach, other crucial sources are the works of the Ibn Tibbon family—*Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim* by Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Malmad ha-Talmidim* by Jacob Anatoli, and most important from this group, the works of Moses Ibn Tibbon, Samuel's son (whom Levi knew personally during his stay

in Montpellier). Not only did Moses' numerous translations of Arabic philosophic and scientific treatises provide Levi with most of his knowledge of the sciences, but his Jewish exegetical treatises, most of them lost to us,²⁷ served as a source for many of Levi's comments and for his very approach to rabbinic sources.

The one area of Judaism that Levi does not present in detail in his treatise is the legal one. He is not interested in his work in what Maimonides labeled the "science of the Law," but rather what the Great Eagle referred to as the "science of the Law in its true sense."²⁸ In his discussion of the reasons of the commandments, Levi at times digresses to deal with halakhic points in an attempt to show how some of the legal debates reflect different philosophic ideas. In these discussions he displays a thorough familiarity with the corpus of Jewish law,²⁹ thereby demonstrating that it was not from a lack of knowledge that he refrained from engaging in this area.³⁰ In addition to his command of the *Mishneh Torah*, he is familiar with the writings of R. Avraham ben David (Rabad), R. Avraham ha-Yarhi (*Sefer ha-Manhig*), R. Isaac ben Abba of Marseille (*Sefer ha-Ittur*), and R. Isaac Alfasi. While he may have thought that the details of the Law were of secondary concern, a more basic consideration for him, as for the more radical philosophic camp in general, was that Maimonides had already accomplished this task in his *Mishneh Torah*. There was no reason, given Levi's understanding of Judaism, to try to improve on Maimonides' great legal treatise. One may even go so far as to say that a major reason for Maimonides' writing of the *Mishneh Torah* was to free the intellectual elite from becoming enmeshed in legal discussions, enabling them to focus almost exclusively on an understanding of the inner core of

27 For a listing of these works see the previous chapter.

28 See *Guide*, introduction, 5.

29 From a number of Levi's comments, there is good reason to maintain that he studied by his uncle, R. Reuben ben Hayyim, who was also the teacher of Menahem HaMeiri. Levi may have known HaMeiri—they share a number of specific interpretations—but he never refers to him by name.

30 Levi in fact expresses a critical attitude regarding those who continued to engage in the writing of legal compendiums, as we shall see below.

Judaism.³¹ As we shall see below, Levi adopts this position in one of his discussions. As Maimonides indicates in his introduction to *Mishneh Torah*, he intended this book to replace all previous books as a source of knowledge of Jewish law, and thus only two books remained necessary for this purpose—the Torah and his own composition, hence its name. Levi clearly hoped that his encyclopedia would complement these two books and provide all the necessary theoretical knowledge and the proper understanding of Jewish lore and beliefs to complete the road to perfection.

Levi ben Avraham’s Biblical Exegesis

Maimonides’ influence on Levi’s philosophic approach is evident throughout his encyclopedia. While Levi favors the naturalistic approach to understanding God’s relation to the world, he is far from being a radical esotericist in his understanding of Maimonides’ thought, or a complete Aristotelian in developing his own. He accepts Maimonides’ proof of creation as valid and presents it as his own position, not appearing to allude to any esoteric view on this subject.³² Yet at the same time, as in the case of Maimonides, he interprets the creation story as referring to the natural process of generation of all that exists on earth.³³ For this reason, Levi does not think that the days of creation each consisted of twenty-four hours. He inclines to the view that each

31 Maimonides does not explicitly mention this point when he discusses in the introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*, as well as elsewhere, the reasons for writing his code, yet there is reason to posit that this indeed is one of the reasons. For a discussion of these reasons, see Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 20-47. For a view of the moderate philosophic camp, personified by Menahem HaMeiri, who devoted much of his efforts specifically to the realm of Jewish law, see in particular Moses Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000) (Heb.).

32 Levi deals with the issue of creation in chapter nine of the section “The Secrets of the Faith”; see *Livyat H̄en: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 65-79. For a discussion of this issue, see my introduction to this volume, xxxii-xxxiv.

33 For an in-depth study of Maimonides’ interpretation, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1987) (Heb.). Levi interprets the creation story in *Livyat H̄en: The Work of Creation*, chapters 10-12.

lasted a thousand years, based on Psalms 90:4. Hence there was enough time for each stage in the natural process to be completed.³⁴ Levi also agrees with Maimonides that the world will never come to an end and there will be no permanent changes in nature.³⁵ He devotes much of his effort as a commentator to provide naturalistic explanations for most of the seemingly supernatural phenomena found in the Bible. The one major issue on which Levi breaks with Maimonides regards the status of astrology. While Maimonides completely rejected the truth of astrology and regarded it as inherently tied to idolatry and the belief in determinism,³⁶ Levi, like Abraham Ibn Ezra, viewed it as a practical science, and made much use of it in his philosophic interpretation of the Bible.³⁷ In the following chapters I will explore in some detail Levi's approach to the Work of the Chariot, prophecy, Mosaic prophecy, miracles, the reasons for the commandments, and prayer. In this chapter I would like to explore a number of other areas relating to his biblical exegesis.

34 See *Livyat Hen: The Work of Creation*, 229-231. Levi derives this interpretation from *Moznei ha-Iyyunim*, which, following Moses Ibn Tibbon, he ascribes to Averroes. For more on this treatise, see below, chapter 8, 304-305. Levi brings support for his view that the day of creation must refer to a much longer period of time from the midrash in BT Sanhedrin 38b, which details what happened every hour on the sixth day. For example, in the sixth hour Adam gave names to all the animals, in the ninth hour he was commanded not to eat of the tree of knowledge, in the tenth hour he disobeyed, in the eleventh hour he was judged and in the twelfth he was expelled from the garden. Levi argues that each of these events clearly took place over a period longer than an hour. Hence the Sages had in mind a "day" that lasted a thousand years.

35 See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 86-92; cf. *Guide* 2.27-29.

36 On Maimonides' approach to astrology, see Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Maimonides' Repudiation of Astrology," *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 123-158.

37 On Ibn Ezra's astrological interpretations, see Shlomo Sela, *Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham Ibn Ezra's Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) (Heb.); see also Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Some Astrological Themes in the Thought of Abraham Ibn Ezra," in *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 28-85.

A good place to start is with the examples brought by the Rashba in his condemnation of allegorical preaching,³⁸ all of which appear in Levi's treatise:

They said about Abraham and Sarah that they are matter and form, and the twelve tribes of Israel are the twelve constellations. . . . They also said that the holy vessels, the *urim* and *tumim*, are an astrolabe. . . . The four kings that fought against the five are the four elements and five senses.³⁹

Rashba goes on to condemn some of the preachers for treating all the stories up to the Giving of the Torah as parables, and also for viewing many of the commandments in this manner in order to lessen their burden. Furthermore, he censures them for their complete devotion to "Greek Wisdom," particularly the philosophy of Aristotle, and in their claiming that without this wisdom, the Torah could not be understood properly, and those lacking this wisdom are like animals. Finally, he charges them with not believing in creation and denying the possibility of any change in nature.⁴⁰ In a later letter, he adds another example, this time clearly alluding to Levi: "Their master [of the allegorical preachers] wrote in regard to their [the Sages'] saying: '*Mem* and *samekh* in the tablets stood in place by a miracle' (BT Shabbat 104a),⁴¹ that this is not possible. Since they have mass they would not be able to stand in place except by some subterfuge—there was something inside [the tablets] that held them up."⁴²

38 For a study of this issue, see Gregg Stern, "Philosophic Allegory in Medieval Jewish Culture: The Crisis in Languedoc (1304-1306)," in *Interpretation and Allegory*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 189-209. It should be noted that Rashba's ire was in no small measure due not only to the interpretations themselves, but the fact that they were taught publicly to a general audience.

39 *Minḥat Qena'ot*, 726-727. These examples appear in *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 613-616, 620, 659-661, 664-665, 878, 880, 885, 890-891.

40 *Minḥat Qena'ot*, 727-728.

41 Since the letters of the tablets were engraved straight through so they could be seen on both sides, and these letters were round, they must have stood in place by a miracle.

42 *Minḥat Qena'ot*, 735; cf. *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 254, 819.

In essence, Rashba brings the following charges based on these examples: 1) early biblical history is treated as a parable, with the implication that the historicity of these stories is denied; 2) miracles as supernatural acts of God are rejected and naturalistic explanations are offered instead, such as the momentous decisions on what course of action the Israelites should take being made on the basis of astrology, rather than by a miraculous device by means of which God communicated with the High Priest, or that certain apparent miracles were accomplished by subterfuge. In these examples, it should be noted, the miracles are not treated as parables, but God's direct involvement is denied. The more general charges brought by Rashba involve the treatment of commandments as parables in order not to have to fulfill them and the regarding of philosophy as the highest truth to which one must completely dedicate oneself. Even the Torah, in this view, must be understood accordingly. In short, God exercises no acts of volition, but His activity is confined to the fixed eternal order of nature.

There is a grain of truth in some of these charges when applied to Levi, while others are the product of a misunderstanding. Since Rashba based his condemnation on the reports that reached him, he was not able to see these views in their proper context.⁴³ Yedaiah Bedershi correctly points out to Rashba in his *Letter of Apology* that the identification of Sarah with matter and Abraham with form was not meant as an interpretation of the Bible itself, but of a rabbinic tale, and there certainly was no intent to deny their historicity.⁴⁴ In the case of the

43 Some of these examples appear in a letter to the Rashba from Don Crescas Vidal; see *Minhat Qena'ot*, 369-370. It should be added that Levi himself responded to the charges against him, but his letter is lost. What remains is Rashba's response to Levi's defense; see *Minhat Qena'ot*, 390-395. Rashba speaks of seeing Levi's booklet (*quntres*), which apparently refers to Levi's letter. This letter clearly made little impression on the Rashba, judging from his very critical response, in which he repeats many of the same charges against Levi and the allegorical preachers.

44 See Yedaiah Bedershi, *Ketav Hitnazlut*, in *She'elot u-Teshuvot ha-Rashba* (Jerusalem, 1976), no. 418, 212. For a study of this work, see Abraham S. Halkin, "Yedaiah Bedershi's 'Apology,'" in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 165-184. Yedaiah ascribes this interpretation to "one of our precious ones who is one of the important sages (*haverim*) of that land and against whom there is the grievance"—a clear reference to Levi, whom he may have known personally when they both lived

identity of the twelve tribes with the twelve constellations, too, it is clear from *Livyat Hen* that Levi did not deny the existence of the tribes, and that he simply maintains that each of them fell under the dominion of a different constellation.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, the issue of the historicity of the early stories of the Bible was a real one for the Jewish philosophers. It is not always clear when the allegorical understanding of a story that they advance comes to replace the literal meaning, or when it comes to supplement it and reveal the story's more profound meaning. With this in mind, let us turn to the problem of Levi's view of the historicity of the early stories in the Torah, beginning with the story of the Garden of Eden.

Maimonides appears to reject the literal meaning of the story when he alludes to its allegorical meaning in the *Guide*,⁴⁶ though in his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq* he accepts the view that such a garden exists and will one day be rediscovered.⁴⁷ As we have seen in the previous chapter, Moses Ibn Tibbon regards much of the story, though certainly not all of it, as essentially true, in addition to having an esoteric meaning.⁴⁸ Levi accepts the view that "every parable is made up primarily of things that exist."⁴⁹ Like Moses Ibn Tibbon and Maimonides, he is convinced that the garden is a real place. Furthermore, he follows Ibn Tibbon in locating it in the vicinity of Mount Kilimanjaro, from where, in their view, flow the sources of the Nile.⁵⁰ What all these thinkers have in common is the refusal to accept an alternative (mythic) reality in which the nature of the world as we know it is completely different. They all agree that serpents do not talk, the fruit of trees do not impart

in Perpignan. The tale in question is the one in BT Baba Batra 58a concerning R. Bana'ah, which Levi deals with in *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 305-308, and will be explored below. Yedaiah continues his work by dealing with the other problematic views mentioned by Rashba.

45 See *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 620, 880.

46 For a discussion of this issue, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1986), 299-305 (Heb.).

47 See Isaac Shailat (ed. and Heb. trans.), *Iggerot HaRambam* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1987), 137.

48 See above, chapter 4, 112-114.

49 See *Livyat Hen: The Work of Creation*, 39.

50 *Ibid.*, 39-41; see above, chapter 4, 112.

knowledge or grant eternal life, and angels with swords that stand as guards do not exist. To the degree that they thought that they could interpret the details of the story in a way that was in conformity with nature, they were prepared to accede to their literal truth in addition to their allegorical meaning.

Yet it is the allegorical meaning that is of greater concern to Levi, even when the literal meaning is seen to be true. While there is a real garden in a region called Eden, the philosophical truths they represent are far more important. As in the case of parables in general, Levi sees no reason to limit them to a single interpretation. He brings two different meanings to the garden and to Eden and the river that flows from it: 1) the garden is the sublunar world, Eden is the world of the spheres, and the river represents the forces emanating from the spheres; 2) the garden is the sublunar world, Eden is the Active Intellect, and the river represents the forms emanating from the Active Intellect. In addition, the garden may be seen as representing the body, or following a different line of interpretation, it represents the areas of wisdom that the human intellect is capable of attaining.⁵¹ Levi, like his philosophic predecessors, also shows how the Sages picked up on some of these meanings and expanded upon them, or understood the biblical parable in still other ways—a point that will be explored in more detail below. In a similar manner, Levi approaches the four rivers. They are real rivers that he attempts to identify, and at the same time they represent different scientific notions, such as the four elements and the qualities each one possesses.⁵²

The children of Adam and Eve also illustrate this point. Levi is certainly far more interested in the allegorical meaning of their names and the events surrounding them than in the literal meaning of the

51 Ibid., 47, 49-50.

52 Ibid., 39-46. Some of Levi's allegorical explanations of other details of this story have been analyzed by Sara Klein-Braslavy, "R. Levi ben Avraham of Villefranche's Interpretation of 'Adam and Eve' in the Story of the Garden of Eden," in *Tribute to Michael: Studies in Jewish and Muslim Thought Presented to Professor Michael Schwarz*, ed. Sara-Klein Braslavy, Benjamin Abrahamov, and Joseph Sadan (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2009), 105-139 (Heb.).

stories.⁵³ He leaves little doubt, however, that he sees in them actual historical individuals. While the great number of years lived by the ancients would appear to belie the fact that they were real individuals, or alternately, that nature does not change, Levi nonetheless accepts their historicity. He brings a number of explanations to show that their longevity is possible in nature due to geographical, astrological, dietary, behavioral, and hereditary factors.⁵⁴

The actual occurrence of the flood is also not doubted by Levi, and he traces it to astrological reasons. The structure of the ark as specified in the Torah would indeed have enabled it to float on the water in his view. Yet Levi does not accept the literal truth of all the details of the story. The flood did not encompass the entire world, as already indicated by the Sages who excluded the Land of Israel,⁵⁵ nor could the ark

53 Ibid., 152-160. Levi interprets the three children—Cain, Abel, and Seth—as referring to the three faculties of the intellect: the practical intellect that knows the crafts, the deliberative faculty that is responsible for governance, and the theoretical intellect that knows the sciences.

54 Ibid., 318-326. Levi also cites Moses Ibn Tibbon's explanation that these individuals were leaders who laid down legislations, and the number of years each one lived refers to the period that his legislation was in effect. Levi adds a similar explanation in his own name—each individual was the head of a family, and all of his descendants continued to be called by his name for the number of years stated. Ibn Tibbon's explanation as cited by Levi was subsequently adopted by Nissim of Marseilles; see below, chapter 6, 201-202.

55 See BT Zevahim 113a; Genesis Rabbah 33.6. As mentioned above, Levi accepts the view that the world will continue to exist eternally and nature will never change. He follows Averroes in rejecting the idea advanced by Avicenna that even if a species becomes completely extinct, it can reappear when matter is again prepared to receive the form of that species, and this is true of the human species as well. According to Averroes, human beings can only be generated from members of the species. Samuel Ibn Tibbon mentions this controversy, while leaning toward Avicenna's view in this matter—a view that allows for a continuous corruption and regeneration of the world; see *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, ed. Mordechai Bislich (Pressburg: Anton Edlen v. Schmid, 1837), chap. 3, 8. For a study of this issue see Gad Freudenthal, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Avicennian Theory of an Eternal World," *Aleph* 8 (2008): 41-129. While Levi denies the possibility of the corruption and regeneration of species, he agrees that the earth may still undergo widespread, though not total, destruction due to the strengthening of the element of fire leading to global warming, or the element of water leading to widespread flooding, as in Noah's time; see *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 89-90.

contain so many animals. Hence the story should be interpreted as alluding to an esoteric level. The flood hints to the corruption of the human being—who is a micro-cosmos—due to his succumbing to the evil inclination and overly engaging in sexual activity. The ark represents the improvement of one’s morals, in order not to drown in one’s sins. Levi goes on to interpret many of the other details of the story along similar lines.⁵⁶

The interplay between the exoteric and esoteric levels of the story, and the interpretation of the homilies of the Sages as expanding upon the esoteric level, characterize Levi’s treatment of the stories of Genesis in general. The Tower of Babel, for example, is a real tower at the same time that it represents the belief in God as the spirit of the sphere.⁵⁷ The city both is a real city and represents the religion of the inhabitants. The “one language” they shared literally refers to a single language they all spoke, at the same time that it represents a single religion. The goal of the inhabitants according to the literal meaning of the story was to build a tower in order to attract all the inhabitant of the world to the same place, not to actually climb up to the heavens, which everyone knows is impossible. In so doing they wished to establish fraternity between all people and peace on earth, by having everyone live together, share the same temperament, language, opinions, and belief, under the same ruler, whom Levi, following the midrash, identifies as Nimrod. Their dispersal to the four corners of the earth led to changes in their physical disposition, language, opinions and belief.⁵⁸ On the figurative level, the story indicates that the arguments for their religious belief were challenged by Abraham and his followers, who proved that the Mover of the sphere is separate from matter, thereby thwarting their attempt to unite everyone in their false belief. The midrash concerning the tower: “A third was burnt, a third was swallowed up, and a third exists” (BT Sanhedrin 109a), picks up on

56 See *Livyat Ĥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 636-640.

57 See Maimonides’ description of the Sabian religion in *Guide* 3.29.

58 Following the doctrine of climatology, which maintains that the physical environment in which a people live plays an important role in molding their character and culture.

both levels of the story. On the literal level, the Sages related what actually happened to the uncompleted tower. On the allegorical level, the midrash refers to the different aspects of the belief of the inhabitants. The existence of the spirit of the sphere could not be known by the senses, hence it was “swallowed up.” The belief that the body of the sphere itself is the deity was demonstratively proven false, hence this opinion was “burnt.”⁵⁹

The patriarchs were all real people, according to Levi, and all that the Torah describes and conforms with what is possible in nature actually happened to them. At the same time, Jacob and his family can be seen as alluding to the different faculties of the soul,⁶⁰ and the four kings who fought the five can be seen as representing the four elements and five senses.⁶¹ Levi brings numerous explanations of both the exoteric and esoteric levels of many other stories found in Genesis. Only when he sees a problem from a rational perspective in accepting the exoteric aspect of a story does the figurative interpretation replace, rather than supplement, the literal interpretation, without necessarily rejecting the historicity of the story as a whole. In those instances in which it is clear that the events described took place in a prophetic vision, he treats the entire story as a product of the prophet’s own imagination that did not actually occur. As Maimonides had already indicated, stories in which the prophet sees or hears angels are in fact dreams or visions.⁶² This position in turn calls into question the historicity of a number of central stories in the Torah.

59 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 646-647. Levi does not interpret the meaning of “a third exists.” This apparently refers to the notion that the motion of the spheres influence the four elements and all that are composed of them, which was considered to be an empirical truth. For the range of medieval Jewish philosophical approaches to this story, see Michael Roni, “Medieval Jewish Philosophical Commentaries to the Story of the Tower of Babel” (PhD Thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2006) (Heb.).

60 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 716-717. Levi brings this interpretation in the name of Moses Ibn Tibbon; see above, chapter 4, 93.

61 *Ibid.*, 659-663.

62 See *Guide* 2.42.

One of these stories is that of the three angels who came to Abraham. Maimonides singled out this story as an example of a prophetic vision, a view that aroused the ire of Nahmanides insofar as it denied the actual occurrence of the events depicted.⁶³ Jacob's wrestling with an angel falls into the same category.⁶⁴ A similar position is adopted by Maimonides in regard to all the "crazy actions" that the prophets were commanded to perform, such as Ezekiel being ordered to dig in a wall, or Hosea being ordered to marry a harlot. These actions too were carried out only in the vision itself, according to Maimonides, and not in reality.⁶⁵ In none of these cases, however, does Maimonides explain the parable; he simply points out that it should be treated as such. Certain crucial events that may be construed to have taken place in visions in accordance with the criteria Maimonides lays down—most notably, the binding of Isaac and the destruction of Sodom—are nevertheless treated by him as events that actually occurred.⁶⁶ In this manner he preserves the historicity of those stories that play a more crucial role in upholding Jewish belief

Levi follows in Maimonides' footsteps, while supplying multiple explanations for many of the stories that he regards as parables. He too regards the story of Abraham seeing three angels as having occurred in a prophetic vision. He picks up on the Sages' identification of them as Raphael, Michael, and Gabriel,⁶⁷ as a reference to the spheres of Mercury, the Moon, and the Sun. Abraham attained by way of his vision astrological knowledge foretelling future events: his being cured after his circumcision due to the activity of Mercury, Sarah's giving birth due to the activity of the Moon, and the destruction of Sodom due to the activity of the Sun.⁶⁸ In addition to his astrological interpretation of this vision in accordance with what he sees as the intent of the

63 Ibid.; cf. Nahmanides, *Commentary on Genesis* 18:1.

64 *Guide* 2.42.

65 *Guide* 2.46.

66 Ibid., 3.24, 50.

67 See *Genesis Rabbah* 50.2; BT *Baba Mezi'a* 86b.

68 It should be noted that Levi does not doubt the actual occurrence of Sodom's destruction, just as he does not deny the occurrence of the binding of Isaac, which he mentions in passing in a number of passages of his treatise.

Sages, Levi offers a more philosophical explanation. He sees in these figures an allusion to the three powers of the rational faculty—the theoretical, deliberative and practical—or the three types of intellect: the passive, the acquired and the Active Intellect.⁶⁹ For those who may be disturbed by the denial of the historicity of this story, Levi also brings the possibility that the “men” seen by Abraham were not angels seen in a vision but actual people—namely, fellow prophets, two of whom continued on to Sodom to rescue Lot.⁷⁰

Jacob’s wrestling with an angel is also explained as a vision involving astrological knowledge, in light of the Sages’ identification of the angel as the Guardian of Esau⁷¹—an apparent reference to Mars, which was then in its ascendancy. A further interpretation brought by Levi is that this vision alludes to the overcoming of the evil inclination by the intellect.⁷² Jacob’s subsequent limp as a result of his wrestling with the angel is also explained allegorically, and by extension, the reason for the commandment not to eat the sinew of the vein is an allegorical one reminding us to restrain our sexual appetite.⁷³ Still another explanation of this vision sees in the angel an allusion to the Active Intellect and Jacob’s struggle to conjoin with it despite his preoccupation with earthly matters. Levi goes on to suggest that Jacob’s limp may even be understood literally, insofar as such intense visions weaken the bodily limbs and their powers. He cites Averroes’ discussion in *Epitome on Parva Naturalia* in corroboration of this view.⁷⁴

The same pattern of interpretation characterizes subsequent biblical history, from the time the Israelites went down into Egypt. Levi casts no doubt on the literal truth of the stories, except in those instances where the story occurs in a prophetic vision, such as the story

69 See *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 652-659.

70 *Ibid.*, 658. The notion that prophets are at times called “angels” is presented by Maimonides; see *Guide* 2.41.

71 See *Genesis Rabbah* 77.3.

72 See *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 703-705.

73 *Ibid.*, 705.

74 *Ibid.*, 706-709; cf. Averroes, *Epitome of Parva Naturalia*, trans. Harry Blumberg (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1961), 48.

of the burning bush.⁷⁵ His discussion is devoted in large measure to a presentation of naturalistic explanations for many of the seemingly supernatural events experienced by the Israelites. At the same time, he points out allegorical meanings of the stories when he discerns them, such as the story of Jethro and his seven daughters.⁷⁶

Levi follows Maimonides in offering social reasons for Israel's sojourn in the desert for forty years. God does not perform miracles to change the nature of human beings, and the Israelites who left Egypt were not yet prepared to wage war and conquer the Land. Only the next generation who did not grow up in slavery would have the courage and other characteristics necessary for this endeavor.⁷⁷ Levi adds four other reasons why a lengthy sojourn in the desert was beneficial to the Israelites before taking possession of the Land: 1) to abolish the false beliefs of the Sabians and their practices, to which the Israelites were accustomed; 2) to prevent other nations from witnessing and rejoicing in God's punishments of the Israelites for their sins, which God foresaw they would commit; 3) to accustom the Israelites to live without superfluous things and to strengthen their dependence upon God; 4) to abolish their belief in demons, which they believed inhabited the desert, when they see that during this whole period no demons appeared.⁷⁸

Levi's biblical exegesis at times reveals him as a subtle interpreter of Maimonides as well. Regarding the strange story of God attempting to kill Moses while on his way to Egypt until Zipporah saved him by circumcising their son,⁷⁹ Levi argues that the story clearly did not happen in reality. God in the story refers to an angel that can only be "seen" in visions. Levi adduces a number of additional reasons why the story is exceptionally problematic when understood literally, and thus must be interpreted allegorically. Moses represents the intellect, and Zipporah represents the pure matter that obeys the rational faculty.

75 Levi explains this vision in *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 733-740.

76 *Ibid.*, 726-727.

77 *Ibid.*, 759-760; cf. *Guide* 3.32.

78 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 762-764.

79 See Exodus 4:24-26.

The act of circumcision performed by Zipporah on their youngest son represents the cessation of pursuing the superfluous and the elimination of false ideas that result from the impure matter, which leads the rational soul astray. Levi continues:

And she caused it to touch (vatagga') his feet [Exodus 4:25], that is, she caused it to touch and understand its causes, and she saved her groom, husband, and her form.⁸⁰ It says vatagga' in the active causative form of the verb, since the main intellectual activity is ascribed to the intellect. If this matter were in accordance with its literal meaning, it would have said: and she touched (vatiga') his feet, in the simple form of the verb. Similarly, and he caused it to touch (vayagga') my mouth [Isaiah 6:7]—that is, the seraph caused his word and spirit to touch my intellect. The Master [Maimonides] brought it [Exodus 4:25] in connection with the touching of one body with another, in accordance with the literal meaning. He also brought in connection with this matter [the verse] he caused it to touch my mouth—this was in accordance with prophetic imagination that the angel caused the live coal to touch the mouth of the prophet. That which he [Maimonides] brought whose meaning is equivocal and figurative, he brings as simple easy matters, and leaves aside the matters that were his main intent, for the purpose of concealment, and he relies upon the understanding of the erudite.⁸¹

Levi refers here to Maimonides' discussion in *Guide* 1.18, where he discusses the terms *qarob* (to approach), *nago'a* (to touch) and *nagosh* (to come near). As for "touching," Maimonides defines its basic meaning as "drawing near of one body to another," and brings as examples the use of this term in Exodus 4:25 and Isaiah 6:7. He subsequently brings the secondary meaning of this term, which is "union in knowledge and drawing near through apprehension," and adduces Jeremiah 51:9 as an example of this usage. Levi points out that the true meaning of "to touch" in Exodus 4:25 and Isaiah 6:7 is precisely the secondary meaning and not the primary one. In both verses we are dealing with a prophetic vision in which "to cause to touch" signifies to bring about

80 "Feet" alludes to cause; see *Guide* 1.28. That is, the elimination of the superfluous and false ideas enables the intellect to understand its causes, which leads to its perfection and salvation.

81 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 728-729.

understanding. Maimonides certainly knew the true meaning of these verses, so the question arises why he nevertheless brought them as examples of physical touching, rather than other examples that were more appropriate. According to Levi, Maimonides did so in order to hide the true meaning of these verses from his less intelligent readers, while signaling it to his more astute ones. His method is to call attention to both verses by bringing them as examples of the first meaning, as if we are dealing with actual physical touching. His less intelligent readers will not discern that there is a problem with these examples. His more perceptive readers, on the other hand, will understand that the term “to cause to touch” in these verses should not be understood literally. The secondary meaning that Maimonides brings immediately afterwards—that touching refers to understanding—is in fact the intended one. Levi may also be implying that Maimonides juxtaposed the two verses in order to hint that just as the verse in Isaiah refers to a prophetic vision, so does the one in Exodus. In this manner, Levi sheds further light on Maimonides’ methods of concealment at the same time as he elucidates upon the true meaning of a problematic story in the Torah.

As opposed to Maimonides, however, astrology plays a prominent role in Levi’s understanding of a number of biblical stories. While some of the plagues in Egypt were in part accomplished by Moses on the basis of his superior knowledge of all of existence, others were accomplished by Aaron on the basis of astrological knowledge. Even the Sages, Levi points out, hinted at Aaron’s expertise in this area when they said: “The seven clouds of glory were in virtue of Aaron” (BT Rosh Hashanah 3a)—an allusion to the seven planets. Levi explains that some of the plagues came about due to changes involving the element of fire, others air, others water, and others earth. The killing of the first born, according to one opinion brought by Levi, was due to pestilential air that became exceptionally hot and dry, thereby affecting in particular the first born, who tend to have more natural heat. For this reason the Jews were commanded to stay home and to take a bunch of hyssop dipped in blood in order to humidify the air.⁸² In Levi’s view,

82 See *Livyat Hēn: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 95-98.

the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert and their different stations of rest for varying periods of time were all determined on the basis of the position of the stars. He gives a similar reason for why Amaleq chose to attack Israel when it did, and why Moses chose Joshua to lead the battle against them rather than lead the Israelites himself. Levi finds support for his view in a number of rabbinic homilies that expand upon the astrological interpretation of this story.⁸³

Not only astrology underlies many of Levi's explanations, but also certain parapsychological phenomena. Balaam's ability as a soothsayer (*qosem*), for example, is explained by Levi in a number of ways. In addition to tracing this ability to a perfect imagination, which attains an emanation from the Active Intellect—an explanation advanced by Alfarabi, Maimonides, and Averroes—Levi raises the possibility that it results from an emanation from the World Soul, a view mentioned by Avicenna, Al-Batalyawsi, and the author of *Moznei ha-'Iyyunim*.⁸⁴ Levi also brings the rabbinic explanation that Balaam was an adept in astrology, enabling him to know the appropriate times to bless and to curse.⁸⁵ Finally, he offers the following explanation for the efficacy of Balaam's curses:

It is not impossible that there exists a venomous person who by his curse can inflict harm on everything that he sees, especially upon one whose power and body have deteriorated and who is susceptible to be instantly afflicted and exposed to harm, all the more so in a malevolent hour.⁸⁶ This is due to the fact that a great disparity exists between the individuals of some of the [species of] animals. There are people who are not susceptible to the evil eye due to the strength of their temperament, as it is said: "I am of the descendants of Joseph" etc. [BT Berakhot 20a].⁸⁷ I will explain this [statement] below in the

83 See *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 770-771.

84 Ibid., 153-154. For the World Soul in Arabic and Jewish philosophy, see Alexander Altmann, "The Ladder of Ascension," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, ed. Ephraim Urbach et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 1-32.

85 See *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 128, 157; cf. BT Sanhedrin 105b, BT Berakhot 7a.

86 That is, when the position of the stars bodes evil for the individual.

87 The Talmudic passage reads as follows: "Rabbi Yoḥanan would often go and sit at the gates of the place of [ritual] immersion [where woman would go to purify

Gate of the Haggadah in connection with a different matter.⁸⁸ You see how Balaam sought out places where he was able to see Israel. A person who believes in this and whose imagination is occupied with it will be more greatly harmed. Perhaps this occurs by mediation of the World Soul, which instills its power in the souls. Possibly in this manner some of the sages who possessed strong souls could punish those upon whom they directed their gaze, either killing them or marring their success, as it is said: “Every place upon which the sages gazed—either death or poverty resulted” [Ḥagigah 5b]. This did not occur solely by gazing. Rav Sheshet was blind, yet it is written about him in the chapter “One who Sees” that he glanced at a heretic who then turned into a pile of bones.⁸⁹ This [ability] is aided by one’s natural temperament and the power of the constellation.⁹⁰

Levi explains the efficacy of Balaam’s curses by ascribing to him an “evil eye,” which he treats as a natural phenomenon and whose existence was accepted also on empirical grounds. He traces this ability to a particularly powerful imagination that can affect matter outside the person himself, upon which he gazes. Avicenna had earlier presented a similar theory regarding the efficacy of the evil eye, which also serves as the basis for his view of the prophet as miracle worker.⁹¹ Levi adds that the victim’s physical and psychological disposition can make him either an easier target or one who is inured to the power of the evil eye. Astrological factors for Levi play an important role as well. He raises the further possibility that the World Soul serves as an intermediary in this matter. Since it affects all souls, certain powerful souls may receive from it the capability to act on other souls in a similar manner.⁹² Rabbinic literature brings a number of statements and stories that

themselves]. He said: When the daughters of Israel ascend and come out from their immersion, they look at me and will have children as beautiful as me. The Sages said to him: Does not the Master fear the evil eye? He said to them: I am of the descendants of Joseph, upon whom the evil eye has no dominance.”

88 See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 245.

89 See BT Berakhot 58a.

90 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 158-159.

91 See Shams Inati (trans.), *Ibn Sina and Mysticism—Remarks and Admonitions: Part Four* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 105-107. For more on this approach, see below, chapter 9, 334.

92 On the World Soul, see above, note 84.

mention the evil eye, lending further support to the existence of this phenomenon. In this case, Levi sees no need to interpret these statements allegorically. The power of the imagination to affect matter lies at the heart of the Talmudic story of Rabbi Yoḥanan, who was not affected by the evil eye, but whose beauty left a deep impression upon the imagination of the women leaving the ritual bath, on their way home to have intercourse with their husbands. Their thinking of his beauty helped determine the traits of the children that were conceived. The notion of the power of the imagination in this matter characterizes not only humans but also animals, as Levi indicates regarding Jacob's stratagem in using rods to produce streaked, speckled, and spotted cattle. He explains: "The story of the rods concerns a natural matter. The imagination and representation very much affect the nature of the newborn, since the sperm is something that comes from the animal with an imagination."⁹³

Levi ben Avraham's Rabbinic Exegesis

Levi presents innumerable philosophic interpretations of rabbinic texts throughout the second part of his encyclopedia, and chooses to conclude his encyclopedia with an extensive discussion devoted exclusively to this subject, thereby highlighting its significance in his view. He opens the Gate of the Haggadah with a discussion of "Greek Wisdom," which is prohibited in the Talmud.⁹⁴ The continuous controversies in Provence concerning the permissibility of learning philosophy, which its opponents equated with "Greek Wisdom," if not outright heresy, undoubtedly looms in the background of his decision to begin with this topic. Levi essentially argues at length two basic points. 1) "Greek Wisdom" includes all kinds of literature, some of

93 *Livyat Ḥen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 209; cf. *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 677. In a similar manner, Radak explains this story; see his *Commentary on Genesis* 30:39.

94 See *Livyat Ḥen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 187-192. See also my introduction, lx-ixvii, and Dov Schwartz, "'Greek Wisdom'—A Reexamination of this Issue in the Period of the Polemics on the Study of Philosophy," *Sinai* 104 (1989): 148-153 (Heb.). The Talmudic prohibition is found in BT Sotah 49b.

which were prohibited, such as books of Greek religion, while others were regarded as a waste of time, such as books on the art of poetry, Greek fables, chronologies of kings. Yet there certainly was never any intent on the part of the Sages to prohibit “the books of wisdom written by the true philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.”⁹⁵ 2) The Jews of ancient times already possessed books of science and transmitted this knowledge to the other nations, who suppressed the origins of the knowledge they received. In the course of time, the Jews themselves forgot this knowledge and lost most of these books. Among the Sages there were still those that possessed much of this wisdom and even some of the ancient books in Hebrew that contained it, as evidenced by the scientific knowledge ascribed to them in the Talmud.⁹⁶ While Levi’s first point shows that learning science and philosophy is in fact permissible, the second point shows its desirability. Moreover, this point lays the foundation for reading philosophic and scientific views into many of the rabbinic homilies and tales, particularly the more outlandish ones. It shows why such a reading is not anachronistic, but uncovers the Sages’ original intent.

The idea of the antiquity of science and philosophy among the Jews, who then transmitted this knowledge to the gentiles, is one that existed well before Levi’s time. It served both to justify the contemporary study of science and to underscore the greatness of the ancient Israelites as compared to all other nations.⁹⁷ The manner in which Levi advances this idea is of particular interest. He does not hold that most of the knowledge possessed by the Sages in philosophic and scientific matters was originally received in revelation. Rather, it was knowledge that was discovered in ancient times by way of rational investigation, in the spirit of Maimonides’ depiction of the rational speculations of the patriarch Abraham pertaining to the existence of God.⁹⁸ He also does not claim that the knowledge the Jews transmitted to the other

95 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 192.

96 *Ibid.*, 192-204.

97 For a comprehensive study of this notion see Abraham Melamed, *The Myth of the Jewish Origins of Science and Philosophy* (Haifa and Jerusalem: Haifa University Press and Magnes Press, 2010) (Heb.).

98 See *Guide* 3.29; cf. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1.3.

nations was the same knowledge that the Jews learned, or relearned by reading the Greek books in science and philosophy. It is clear from Levi's account that the Sages learned many new things from these books. In turn, they took an active role in the further advancement of science, such as in the fields of astronomy and medicine. They wrote their own books on these subjects, which together with the older Hebrew books of science were lost or destroyed. In short, in Levi's view there was a lot of Greek in Jewish Palestine when it came to philosophic and scientific matters.

Following Moses Ibn Tibbon, Levi is not of the opinion that all the Sages possessed scientific and philosophic knowledge. Those who did generally lived in the Land of Israel, since they benefited from the superior qualities of this land.⁹⁹ The rabbinic homilies that convey this knowledge, which were far more common in Israel than Babylonia, reveal the intellectual superiority of their authors. It is interesting to note that Levi draws a critical distinction between homilies and tales. The rabbinic homilies, *midrashim*, he sees as resulting from wisdom and inquiry, as evidenced from the Hebrew term *derash*, signaling that they in fact contain a concealed layer. The apparent disagreements among the Sages in many of the homilies should often be interpreted as reflecting disagreements in scientific and philosophic matters, though at times one of the opinions is simply supplementing the knowledge conveyed by a previous opinion. The same approach, however, should not be adopted in regard to the *haggadot*, which are stories; only some of them should be understood esoterically.¹⁰⁰

In keeping with his approach to the Sages as philosophers and scientists, Levi denies that they believed in demons. As is true of most Aristotelian philosophers, Levi rejects the existence of such creatures, particularly since he does not believe in the possibility of the existence

⁹⁹ See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 207. For a study of this notion see Abraham Melamed, "The Land of Israel and Climatology in Jewish Thought," in *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought*, ed. Moshe Hallamish and Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Yad Yizhak Ben-Zevi, 1991), 52-78 (Heb.).

¹⁰⁰ See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 207-208, 243

of disembodied souls,¹⁰¹ hence the same stance he ascribes to the Sages. When they speak of such creatures, Levi interprets them as referring to the products of the imagination of weak minded people, or to small harmful creatures, or allegorically, as a reference to the evil inclination. In each instance, the demons should be understood in accord with the context in which they are mentioned.¹⁰² Levi also tries to show that many seemingly superstitious practices advocated by the Sages actually have a rational basis.¹⁰³ In general, Levi advises his readers that they should attempt to interpret the words of the Sages as much as possible in a manner that conforms to what is known by the intellect.¹⁰⁴

Levi does not ignore the issue of the reasons for the Sages' esotericism. Like his philosophic predecessors, he feels that philosophic and scientific knowledge in the wrong hands—namely, those who do not possess the required prerequisites for such study—can be detrimental to the individual's belief.¹⁰⁵ Yet in writing an encyclopedia of science he shows his agreement with Samuel Ibn Tibbon, who was convinced that the times had changed. The current situation requires that the learning of science and philosophy be encouraged among Jews, and that they should view this knowledge as underlying much of Jewish tradition. In other words, Levi's endeavors were very much part of the battle for hearts and minds among his Jewish brethren in determining what they should believe.¹⁰⁶

Despite his view that many of the stories in the Talmud do not contain an esoteric level, Levi offers explanations to a number of fantastic rabbinic tales, many of which he treats as dreams akin to prophetic ones. More than a few of the explanations brought by Levi

101 From among the Islamic philosophers, Avicenna accepted such a possibility; see Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 347-357.

102 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 296-301.

103 *Ibid.*, 244-245.

104 *Ibid.*, 264; cf. *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, and Avraham Israel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 198-201 (Heb.); see above, chapter 4, 000.

105 See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 243.

106 See *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 22, 174. For a partial quote of Samuel Ibn Tibbon's argument, see below, chapter 7, 247; see also above, chapter 4, 82-83.

are taken from the writings of Moses Ibn Tibbon. On a few occasions Levi implicitly rejects Ibn Tibbon's interpretation and offers an alternative one instead.

A good example is the interpretation of the strange Talmudic tale in BT Baba Batra 58a regarding R. Bana'ah, which we explored in the previous chapter.¹⁰⁷ Moses Ibn Tibbon transformed the story of R. Bana'ah finding a cave in which he actually saw Abraham and Sarah, and even Adam, into a story of his finding a crypt in which these figures were artfully depicted. He ends his interpretation with the remark: "If he [the story teller] spoke by way of wisdom, the enlightened one should attempt to find its meaning,"¹⁰⁸ though he himself rests content with his more literal but naturalistic interpretation. Levi, who was well acquainted with Moses Ibn Tibbon's works and in all probability knew this explanation, picks up the gauntlet laid down by Ibn Tibbon. Rather than treat the story as depicting an actual occurrence concerning the discovery of a treasure trove of works of art, he interprets the story as a philosophic parable, or more precisely, as a prophetic type dream of these ancient figures, which represent philosophic notions. The cave represents the human intellect dwelling in the body, Abraham represents a level of intellectual perfection to which R. Bana'ah aspired, and Sarah represents the pure matter that allows the intellect to achieve its perfection. R. Bana'ah succeeds in achieving this level, hinted at in the dream by his entering the cave and beholding Abraham and Sarah. He then aspires to achieve an even greater level of intellectual perfection, that of Adam, which is denied him. In this manner Levi continues his interpretation, shedding light at the same time on his view of conjunction with the Active Intellect.¹⁰⁹

107 See above, chapter 4, 109-110.

108 See *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 200.

109 See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 305-309. In a similar manner, Levi interprets the story of Abba Saul, who entered the thigh bone of Og (BT Niddah 24b), as an allegory referring to sexual desire, while Moses Ibn Tibbon treats the thigh bone of Og as part of a giant ancient statue. See *Livyat Hen: The Work of Creation*, 315-316; cf. *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 197-198.

One can easily understand why Levi was reluctant to accept Moses Ibn Tibbon's interpretation, in keeping with Ibn Tibbon's own advice. The more fantastic the story, the more it is a clear sign that it contains a concealed level, with the natural sciences and metaphysics providing the key to deciphering its true meaning. While Ibn Tibbon allows the possibility that the story of R. Bana'ah contains such a level, it is Levi who seeks to reveal it.

A similar approach marks Levi's interpretation of the strange "tall" tale in BT Berakhot 54b of Moses smiting Og, whose head got stuck in the mountain he lifted to throw upon Israel. Moses Ibn Tibbon, as we have seen in the previous chapter, treats the tale as a historical allegory describing the war between Og and the Israelites, and Og's swearing of allegiance to a powerful king in exchange for help to destroy Israel. The alliance broke up due to mutual rancor, and Moses was able to slay Og while Og was sitting in his siege tower, which was thirty cubits high.¹¹⁰ Levi does not reject Ibn Tibbon's interpretation in this instance, but he adds another layer. He treats it as a philosophic allegory in addition to a historic one. It refers to the activity of the evil inclination that comes to overthrow the powers of the intellect and is not successful. The stone and the mountain refer to evil desires. The size of Moses is given as ten cubits to allude to his apprehension of all the forms of the sublunar world; his leap is given as ten cubits to allude to his apprehension of the motions of the spheres; and the size of his ax is given as ten cubits to allude to his apprehension of the Separate Intellects and his conjunction with the tenth one (the Active Intellect). In this manner he defeated Og, who denied the existence of non-material existents and God's governance of the world.¹¹¹ Levi's encyclopedia contains many more examples of tales in which he discerns an esoteric level alluding to scientific and philosophic matters, in addition to the numerous homilies he weaves into all his discussions and interprets in this manner.

110 See above, chapter 4, 107-109.

111 See *Livyat Ĥen: The Work of Creation*, 309-313.

Levi ben Avraham as Social Critic

Levi's discussion of "Greek Wisdom" and his attempt to disassociate it from science and philosophy reflects a defensive posture against the charges brought against the philosophers in his period on the part of the more staunch traditionalists. At the same time he expresses a strongly critical attitude of these traditionalists as well as of other social and intellectual trends that characterize his social environment. Levi's entire literary enterprise, as we have seen, is based on the Aristotelian notion that human perfection lies in the perfection of the intellect, which in turn consists of knowledge of the sciences. Moreover, human immortality, according to him, results from the attainment of this perfection.¹¹² Thus all actions and learning must be gauged from the perspective of how they contribute to or detract from it—a point that serves as the foundation of Maimonides' philosophy.¹¹³ With this in mind, it is interesting to note what beliefs and practices Levi singles out in his own period as detrimental to achieving the goal of human perfection.

One of Levi's criticisms echoes the age-old lament of all social educators and reformers against the pursuit of wealth for its own sake. Maimonides indicates clearly that the situation is no different in his own time and that the most defective of human goals "to which the people of the earth spend their lives is the perfection of possessions."¹¹⁴ He also describes the great lengths people go and the tremendous dangers to which they expose themselves to increase their wealth.¹¹⁵ In a similar vein, Levi notes that most of the people love their wealth more than their body. He points out that one of the Hebrew terms for the value of an object is *damim*, which is similar to the term blood, *dam*, alluding to the great devotion people have to their possessions. He also posits a relationship between *damim* and the word for imagination,

112 For a discussion of this point in Levi's thought, see my introduction to *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, xlv-lv.

113 See, for example, *Eight Chapters*, 5; *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Character Traits 3.2; *Treatise on Logic*, 14.

114 *Guide* 3.54: 634.

115 *Guide* 3.12.

dimayon, to indicate that these things have only imaginary value.¹¹⁶ So prevalent is the goal of pursuing wealth, Levi maintains, that “even the wise are afflicted with this illness.”¹¹⁷ Levi’s personal situation, in which he was dependent upon the support of others and had to eke out a living by tutoring, adds a further dimension to appreciating his remarks on this matter:

It is appropriate to learn from the ways of God, who watches over and benefits those who are good. For this reason it is stated: *and in her left hand are riches and honor* [Proverbs 3:16]. In this generation and this land, however, there are few who help the wise befriend them and honor them.¹¹⁸

In addition to the pursuit of wealth, Levi’s discussion of ethics in the opening to the pillar “Boaz” singles out a number of other evil traits—jealousy, domination, and grief. He may have focused upon these traits in particular precisely because of his feeling of their pervasiveness in his period, even among the wise.

Superstitious beliefs and practices are also seen by Levi as highly detrimental to the individual’s wellbeing, and he attempts to negate a number of them. This position may seem more than a little strange to the modern reader, given many of Levi’s own views. One must remember, however, that many of today’s superstitions belonged to yesterday’s science. Levi distinguishes between astrology, the special properties of certain objects, and the ability of certain souls to affect what is outside the body by the superior power of their imagination—which he treats as true insofar as they are supported by empirical observation and can be explained scientifically¹¹⁹—and certain beliefs and practices that he regarded as having no foundation whatsoever. As indicated above, he denies the existence of demons, hence the efficacy of all practices associated with them, such as spells and amulets.¹²⁰ He regards the belief in

116 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 4.

117 *Ibid.*, 27.

118 *Ibid.*, 9.

119 See above, note 91.

120 Compare Maimonides’ critique of the writers of charms in *Guide* 1.61, though his discussion there focuses on the belief in the power of the secret sacred names of

them, and more so, the belief in having seen them, as a result of feeble-mindedness and an overactive imagination. While Levi's immediate concern in his discussion of demons is to explain Talmudic tales that seem to accept their existence and the efficacy of certain practices to gain control over them or protect oneself from them, implicit in his remarks is a critique of many of his contemporaries who continue to believe in them. He expresses a similar critical attitude toward the belief in the ability of certain individuals to make miraculous long journeys in almost no time, despite the traditional sources that appear to confirm such ability.¹²¹ Levi concludes his discussion by arguing that "one should only believe in what is sensed, or known by the intellect or received from our prophets and Sages. The perfect individual should not be tempted to believe anything outside these three."¹²² Ironically, Levi borrows this argument from Maimonides, who brings it in his letter to Montpellier rejecting astrology.¹²³ On this issue, Levi parts company with the Great Eagle, and views astrology as included in, rather than outside, the matters that should be believed.

Yet Levi's indebtedness to astrology is not without reservation. He considers it an inferior area of knowledge, not worthy of devoting much time to it. The words of the Torah and the other sciences, such as astronomy, natural science, and metaphysics, should be the main object of one's studies, for through them the soul attains its perfection. Similar to Maimonides, he also argues that the good and evil that befall a human being are in accordance with his acts, not in accordance with his constellation. While Levi clearly feels that the stars influence a person's acts, they do not determine them. The laws of the Torah serve to

God. For a study of this issue, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "Maimonides and his Disciples on Linguistic Magic and 'the Vain Imaginings of the Writers of Charms,'" in *Jewish Culture in the Eye of the Storm: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Yosef Aḥituv*, ed. Avi Sagi and Naḥem Ilan ('Ein Tsurim: HaKibbutz HaMe'uḥad, 2002), 431-458 (Heb.). For an extensive discussion of the controversy in medieval Jewish thought regarding the efficacy of amulets, see Dov Schwartz, *Amulets, Properties and Rationalism in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Bar-Ilan University Press: Ramat-Gan, 2004) (Heb.).

121 See *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 764-770.

122 Ibid., 770.

123 See *Iggerot HaRambam*, 479.

counter their incidental evil influence, hence “Israel is not governed by the constellation” (BT Shabbat 156a).¹²⁴

Levi’s Aristotelian view that the soul does not remain when the person dies leads him at times to attack contrary beliefs. He mentions Naḥmanides and alludes to his esoteric view that the reason for Levi-rate marriage is to enable the soul of the dead brother to transmigrate to the infant born of this union. Levi labels this opinion “corrupt.”¹²⁵ He also reports having heard an “Ashkenazi rabbi” explain the Talmudic statement in BT Shabbat 152b that the soul ascends and descends for twelve months while the body still exists, and when the body no longer exists the soul just ascends, as referring to the wicked, in whose case the descent of the soul imparts feeling to the decaying body, thereby resulting in its experience of suffering. Only after this period, when the body is completely corrupted, does the soul ascend to the Garden of Eden. Levi considers this opinion too as clearly false. With the death of the individual, he argues, the body begins to return to matter and is no longer fit to retain a soul, while the soul is no longer capable of movement or of maintaining any feeling or imaginative knowledge.¹²⁶ Levi also rejects the notion that “hell” (*gehinnom*) refers to an actual place, and he sees it as an allusion to the extinction of the soul, or its being “cut off” (*karet*), with the death of the body.¹²⁷ Levi’s critique of certain views held by his contemporaries extends to the Kabbalists. They appear to have continued to flourish in Provence in this period, with some of them incorporating philosophic ideas into their system.¹²⁸

124 See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 189.

125 *Ibid.*, 240; cf. Naḥmanides, *Commentary on Genesis* 38:8. See also Bahya ben Asher, *Commentary on Numbers* 25:9.

126 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 279-280. This opinion may have been influenced by R. Saadiah’s approach in *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 9.5.

127 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 161. Maimonides alludes to this view in his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*, but does not make this point explicit. It should be noted that Levi, like Maimonides, is careful to defend the belief in bodily resurrection, though it is not completely clear whether this is his true opinion on the issue; see my introduction to *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, lvi-lviii.

128 For the Kabbalistic circles that continued to exist in Provence in the second half of the thirteenth century, see Ram Ben-Shalom, “Kabbalistic Circles Active in the

Levi scathingly attacks them for positing a level of existence between that of God and the Separate Intellects.¹²⁹ The critique against Naḥmanides, the Ashkenazi rabbi, and the Kabbalists shows that different alternatives to Aristotelian philosophic thought regarding such central issues as the soul and the structure of the higher world continued to find a home in Provence in the second half of the thirteenth century, and that Provence remained subject to ideological influences from both the South (Spain) and the North (Northern France and Germany).

As the controversy that erupted in Provence a few years after Levi completed his composition reveals, the main alternative to the philosophic enterprise continued to come from the direction of those committed to traditional study, particularly of the Talmud. Levi not only defends the study of philosophy against the more traditional-minded antagonists, but offers a scathing criticism of them as well:

Since our nation was the most perfect of nations, they did not have to engage in the interpretation of the commandments, rules of conduct, actions pertaining to the laws and matters requiring adjudication. Maimonides revealed his opinion on this issue in the opening to *Mishneh Torah*. This was how it was in the days of the prophets and the members of the Great Assembly, till the controversies in Israel grew more numerous.¹³⁰ For this reason, the perfect of mind were able to engage in other sciences, until one became perfect and a person in truth. It is not good that a person devotes his study solely to the Talmud, and that he engages only in these matters. They [the contemporary scholars], however, do not think so. They think it is only right to engage solely in matters of [Talmudic] controversies and dialectics, in order to cry out and boast and be called “master,” in

South of France (Provence) in the Thirteenth Century,” *Tarbiz* 82 (2014): 569-605 (Heb.).

129 See *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, 189-190. For a further discussion of Levi’s critique, see below, chapter 7, 257-260.

130 The reference should be to Maimonides’ introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*. For a discussion of the relevant passage, see below, chapter 8, 286-287. Levi interprets Maimonides as maintaining that due to the power of their intellects, the earlier Sages were able to see immediately how the problems that arose should be decided, and moreover, they were in complete agreement with one another. Hence they did not require lengthy deliberations resulting in many controversies.

their choosing imaginary domination.¹³¹ Many of them do not wish to know the final decisions that arise [from the legal controversies], but to engage more in their feeble reading. They do not aim at perfection and the eternal life of the soul, but flee from it. For what arises from the words of the Talmud is knowledge of the commandments and their fulfillment, and the final decision is what is intended in practical matters, and “everything follows from the ending” (BT Berakhot 12a).¹³²

Levi essentially echoes the criticism voiced earlier by Jacob Anatoli against this traditionalist group, when he writes in his introduction to *Malmad ha-Talmidim*:

The Sages explained that the Work of the Chariot is a “great matter,” and all wisdoms are directed to it and are like preparations for it. . . . Regarding the controversies of Abaye and Rabba, they said that they were a “small matter.”¹³³ This is because the teachings of the Mishnah and the rest of the decided laws suffice for those seeking wisdom. This is the opinion of our Sages, may their memory be blessed. But the “great matter” in the eyes of our scholars today, the masters of the tradition (*gemara*), is dealing with the issues of the Talmud—not the clarification of the final decision but dealing with the problems raised there and the resolution of them. The “small matter” is in their eyes the Work of the Chariot, which is the divine science. In their eyes it is not even a “small matter” from among the good matters, but something bad and very bitter.

Jacob Anatoli too gives voice to the rejection of philosophic study on the part of many of his coreligionists who refuse to see the cardinal importance of this study. For both Levi and Anatoli, the main reason for Talmud study is to determine laws. Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* clearly alleviates the need for this endeavor, allowing the wise to devote more time to philosophic study. In his introduction to *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides himself appears to hint that this treatise makes the study

131 Levi also levels the charge that many of the contemporary scholars are motivated by a desire for domination rather than a quest for knowledge and truth in *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 31.

132 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 140. Levi changes the meaning of the Talmudic dictum, which speaks of the conclusion of benedictions, to indicate that only the final decision is of importance.

133 See BT Sukah 28a.

of the Talmud by and large superfluous. While he vociferously denied this point in a letter to Pinḥas Ha-Dayyan—indicating there that he wrote his composition for those not capable of entering into the depths of the Talmud¹³⁴—his letter to his student Joseph ben Judah appears to confirm it:

I already admonished you that you should not be negligent in the effort to attain the entire treatise [*Mishneh Torah*], and make it *your* book, teaching it everywhere in order to spread its usefulness. For the end intended by what was composed in the Talmud and other compositions finds its completion in it [*Mishneh Torah*]. The end of [contemporary] scholars [however] is to waste time dealing with the proceedings in the Talmud, as though the intent and the end is to attain expertise in arguing and not anything else. This was not the [Talmud's] first intent; rather the proceedings and arguments happened incidentally. When a statement was indecisive and one interpreted it in a certain way and another in the contrary manner—each had to show proof in order that his interpretation should prevail. The first intent, however, was to know what was to be performed or avoided. This is clear to one such as you¹³⁵

By equating the Work of the Chariot and Work of Creation with Aristotelian metaphysics and natural science in the first four chapters of *Mishneh Torah*, the Laws of the Principles of the Torah, and seeing in the knowledge of these subjects the fulfillment of the most fundamental commandments of Judaism, Maimonides clearly indicates to what studies the intellectual elite should devote most of their efforts.¹³⁶ Levi, following Anatoli, essentially continues Maimonides' battle against the staunch traditionalists, who see in the study of the legal arguments of the Talmud the highest vocation in its own right.

In a sense, Levi is more radical than his predecessors. He not only chastises his coreligionists for their total devotion to the study of Talmud, even accusing them of both misguidance and poor morals as their motivation, but he is critical of the Babylonian Talmud itself for

134 See *Iggerot HaRambam*, 439.

135 *Ibid.*, 257-258.

136 See also *Mishneh Torah: Laws of the Study of Torah* 1.12, where Maimonides incorporates these subjects into the study of Talmud.

including so many of these legal arguments. The relative brevity of the Palestinian Talmud is not a shortcoming in his view, but an advantage. It reflects the advantage of the Land of Israel and its scholars, the creators of the philosophic homilies, over Babylonia and its scholars.¹³⁷ The Babylonian Talmud is even considered by him to be one of the reasons for the loss of knowledge of the sciences among the Jews:

The loss of knowledge in Israel is due to the severity of our Exile, and the paucity of lovers of knowledge and their helpers among us, and the length of the Babylonian Talmud that preoccupies us. Since the lifetime of a human is short, one should examine each area of knowledge succinctly, all the more so in the case of practical knowledge in which it is sufficient for one [to know] how the matters are decided, and all the more so in the case of our nation than the others, which possess codices of all their laws that contain no differences of opinion. Every erudite person should have been content with the books of the *Mishneh* [*Torah*] composed by Maimonides, which is in truth a complete composition that clarifies the entire tradition thoroughly, or *Sefer Mizvot* by Rabbi Moses of Coucy, were it not for the jealousy that engulfs our nation.¹³⁸

The only justification that Levi could find for the length of the Babylonian Talmud is that the Sages intended that it occupy the time of all those who were not prepared for the study of philosophy. They realized that if those who were not capable engaged in the study of theoretical knowledge, they would be harmed by it¹³⁹—a clear jibe at the detractors of philosophy who glory in their knowledge of the Talmud.

Levi not only deals with some of the challenges to his approach posed by certain beliefs and trends within the Jewish world, but also with the challenges posed by Christianity to Judaism in general. He devotes a lengthy chapter in his treatise to negating the Christians' beliefs and arguments from a philosophical, historical, and exegetical perspective.¹⁴⁰ Most of Levi's discussion appears to be based on earlier

137 See *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 141, 207, 248.

138 *Ibid.*, 234.

139 *Ibid.*, 248. Maimonides agrees that philosophy is detrimental to the intellectually unprepared; see *Guide* 1.34.

140 See *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 287-303. The longer version of this chapter (chapter 12) was removed from the Parma manuscript

Jewish polemical writings. Like Maimonides, Levi views Christianity as a religion that was established well after Jesus, particularly the belief in Jesus' divinity and the Trinity. Jesus himself only claimed to be the Messiah—a claim that can easily be dismissed in light of subsequent Jewish and world history.¹⁴¹ In addition, Levi addresses the issue of the miracles the Christians ascribe to their saints, a point of which he probably was aware from his environment. He regards them as based primarily on deception, with the objective of strengthening belief in the religion and earning money from the believers.¹⁴²

As with all his coreligionists, Levi looked forward to a better period in history for the Jews as well as for all of humanity—the period when the true Messiah would finally appear. He ends the section “On the Secrets of the Faith” with a discussion of messianism.¹⁴³ On this issue, too, Levi draws heavily from Maimonides.¹⁴⁴ Levi's discussion even includes a reckoning of when the messianic period is to begin (1345) and when it will reach its full glory (1390 or 1403).¹⁴⁵ Yet what is

and so only the shorter version remains. Levi attests to having written an independent treatise against Christianity, which has not survived. It should be noted that references to Christianity are scattered throughout the treatise; see in particular *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 174-175. For more on Levi's stance towards Christianity, see Howard Kreisel, “Christian Influences on Levi ben Avraham's *Livyat Hen*,” *Studia Hebraica* 6 (2006): 45-53. For a study of the philosophical polemics against Christianity in Provence, see Daniel J. Lasker, “Christianity, Philosophy and Polemics in Jewish Provence,” *Zion* 68 (2003): 313-332 (Heb.).

141 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 288-291. Maimonides expresses a similar opinion in *Epistle to the Jews of Yemen*; see also *Mishneh Torah*, laws of Kings 11.6.

142 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 295-296.

143 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 173-184. Much of this section is devoted to a discussion of many of Maimonides' thirteen principles. As opposed to Maimonides, who ends his list with resurrection, Levi chooses to end his presentation with the coming of the Messiah instead.

144 For Maimonides' naturalistic-historical approach, see in particular Aviezer Ravitzky, “‘To the Utmost of Human Capacity’: Maimonides on the Days of the Messiah,” in *Perspectives on Maimonides*, ed. Joel Kraemer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 221-256.

145 Maimonides too brought a family tradition in *Epistle to the Jews of Yemen* as to when prophecy was to return to Israel, signaling the beginning of the messianic period. Levi did not see this period beginning in his own lifetime, to the extent that

particularly significant about his discussion is not so much his view of the messianic period but his view of the Exile. While Levi presents the traditional view that the cause of the Exile was the sins of the Jews—which he understands in a Maimonidean manner, that the sins led to the cessation of providential care and the exposure to incidental evils¹⁴⁶—he also points out the positive aspect of this state. Not only did it humble the nation, thereby instilling in them a very important positive trait, but also provided them with materialistic advantages. The nations amongst whom the Jews were dispersed provided them with their physical needs, leaving them more time for study. Levi probably has in mind that agriculture and most crafts were no longer open to the Jews. Yet he sees an advantage in this situation, particularly since the Jews in Southern France lived in relative tranquility and prosperity in his period. He adds:

An act of righteousness He performed for us in exiling us among the nations that possess a faith whose falseness is clear, as it is said: *I will provoke them to anger in a vile nation* [Deuteronomy 32:26], which is translated into Aramaic: “in a stupid nation.” He also performed for us an act of righteousness in dispersing us to all the corners of the world, in order that it would not be easy to annihilate our nation and obliterate us from the world.¹⁴⁷

Levi also alludes to the benefits the Jews bring to the nations by spreading amongst them knowledge of the Torah.

After years of writing, revising, and expanding his majestic composition, Levi concludes the long recension with the following words based on Isaiah 40:29: “Blessed is the One who gives strength to the weary and increases the might of the helpless.” God may work primarily through the natural order for Levi, but he keenly felt God’s aid that enabled him to complete his unique treatise.

he took his reckoning seriously, but neither was it to occur in the distant future—a point that was important in lifting the spirit of his readers.

146 See *Guide* 3.17-18.

147 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 173.

Appendix: Table of Contents of “Boaz”

Treatise 6

Introduction¹⁴⁸

Opening

Discourse on Jealousy

Discourse on the Pursuit of the Superfluous

Discourse on the Trait of Domination

Discourse on Grief and Sadness

Vigilance¹⁴⁹

Part One: On the Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah

Chapter 1: On the Division of Nouns

Chapter 2: On Hebrew Language Usage

Chapter 3: On the Quality of Prophecy and Its Levels

Chapter 4: On Soothsaying and the Difference between Prophets and Soothsayers

Chapter 5: To Explain What Is Known by way of Prophecy, What Is the Difference between the Apprehension of the Prophets and the Apprehension of the Wise Men of Science and Demonstration, and What Is the Difference between Tradition and Faith and between Philosophy

Chapter 6: On the Vision of the Ladder¹⁵⁰

Chapter 7: On the Giving of the Torah

Chapter 8: On the Explanation of the Virtue of our Torah, Its Great Renown, and the Necessity for Giving It

Chapter 9: On the Tablets¹⁵¹

Chapter 10: On the Darkness, Cloud and Mist¹⁵²

Chapter 11: On Opinions and Religions

148 Both the long and short versions of the introduction and the first part have survived and appear in *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*. The table of contents of the long version of the three parts of treatise 6 appears at the end of the introduction, 84-87, based on the Parma manuscript. The names of the chapters brought below are based primarily on this table of contents, though at times I introduced changes based on the formulation of the chapter headings as they appear at the beginning of each chapter.

149 Levi devotes this section to all the positive traits that one who pursues perfection should develop.

150 That is to say, the ladder beheld by Jacob in his prophetic dream.

151 Referring to the two tablets containing the Ten Commandments.

152 At Mount Sinai on the day that the Ten Commandments were given, in accordance with rabbinic tradition.

- Chapter 12: On the Faith of the Christians, and a Brief Negation of Some of their Proofs¹⁵³
- Chapter 13: To Explain that There Is Only One Torah, and the Discourse upon Reward and the Promises of Physical Recompense
- Chapter 14: To Explain that All the Commandments Were Given for a Reason, and What Was the Reason in General for Giving Them, and Types of Their Subdivisions
- Chapter 15: On the Commandments that Come to Inculcate Important Traits
- Chapter 16: On Incest, and the Laws of Circumcision and Vows
- Chapter 17: On the Houses of a Walled City, the Heifer whose Neck is Broken,¹⁵⁴ the Cities of Refuge, and the Reason for the Leniency of Some of the Punishments¹⁵⁵
- Chapter 18: On the Commandments that Come to Abolish Idolatry and the Laws of Its Practitioners
- Chapter 19: On the Commandments that Come to Revere the Temple
- Chapter 20: On the Commandments that Come to Instill Faith and to Safeguard It
- Chapter 21: On the Sabbath and Holidays
- Chapter 22: On an Introduction to the Types of Commandments that Come as a Stimulus to Thought¹⁵⁶
- Chapter 23: On the Tabernacle and Its Utensils
- Chapter 24: On the Characteristics of the Alter and Its Measurements
- Chapter 25: On the Construction of the Temple
- Chapter 26: On the Vestments of the High Priest
- Chapter 27: On Numbers that come as a Stimulus to Thought¹⁵⁷
- Chapter 28: On the Story of the Flood and the Generation of the Schism,¹⁵⁸ and to Interpret the Last Words of David

153 Only the short version of this chapter has survived; the long version was removed from the manuscript.

154 The ritual that is performed when a dead body is found in a field between two cities, and the killer is unknown; see Deuteronomy 21:1-9.

155 An alternate formulation of the chapter heading is: "On the Houses of a Walled City, the Heifer whose Neck is Broken, the Residing of an Inadvertent Murderer in the City of Refuge until the Death of the High Priest, and the Reason for the Leniency of the Sages in regard to some of the Punishments."

156 Levi deals here mostly with commandments whose fulfillment requires knowledge of the sciences, such as the intercalation of the time of the new moon, which requires knowledge of astronomy.

157 For example, various prayers, rituals, and texts that revolve around the number three or the number ten.

158 That is to say, the generation of the Tower of Babel.

- Spoken at the End of the Book of Samuel, and to Speak
of the Belief of the Nobles of Israel¹⁵⁹
- Chapter 29: On the Stories of Abraham
- Chapter 30: On the Stories of Isaac, the Story of the Wells, and on
the Love of Isaac for Esau
- Chapter 31: To Speak about the Verse: *And Esau was forty years*
(Genesis 26:34), and the Verse: *And Devorah Rivka's*
nurse died (Genesis 35:8)
- Chapter 32: On the Stories of Jacob and His Sons
- Chapter 33: On the Stories of Moses
- Chapter 34: On the Stories of Israel

Part Two: On the Secrets of the Faith¹⁶⁰

- Chapter 1: On the of Repudiation of Corporeality and the Negation
of Attributes from God, and on the Request of Moses¹⁶¹
- Chapter 2: On the Explanation of the Thirteen Characteristics¹⁶²
- Chapter 3: On the Explanation of the Names of the Creator,
Blessed be He
- Chapter 4: On the Secret of Prayer¹⁶³
- Chapter 5: Not to Insert an Intermediary¹⁶⁴
- Chapter 6: On the Activity of the Constellation and What is Admis-
sible in regard to It¹⁶⁵
- Chapter 7: To Explain that the Human Being Possesses Will,
Choice and Ability¹⁶⁶
- Chapter 8: On the Advantage of the Level of the Angels and Stars
over Human Beings
- Chapter 9: On the Creation of the World

159 See Exodus 24: 9-11.

160 This part survived only in the short version and appears in the volume *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*. The chapter listing here is based on the table of contents of the long version appearing in the Parma manuscript.

161 In Exodus 33:13, 18.

162 That is to say, the thirteen attributes of God appearing in Exodus 34: 6-7.

163 A translation of this chapter appears below, in the appendix to chapter 11.

164 That is to say, not to worship any intermediary, but to worship God alone. In the table of contents, the chapter heading continues: "and We will Explain in Brief the Existence of the Angels and the Intermediaries, and We will bring the Verse: *and go astray after the gods of the strangers of the land* (Deuteronomy 31:16), and also one of the Psalms of the Sons of Korah."

165 An alternate reading: "the worship of it."

166 In the table of contents the chapter heading continues: "and the Righteous individual who is by Nature Righteous is more Perfect and Esteemed than the One who Conquers his Evil Inclination, and We will speak of the Repentant and the Conditions of Repentance and Its Value."

- Chapter 10: On the Psalm of Eitan ha-Ezrahi¹⁶⁷ and the Three Verses of *Your Righteousness*¹⁶⁸
- Chapter 11: On the Eternity of the World
- Chapter 12: On Miracles
- Chapter 13: On the Sun Standing Still for Joshua
- Chapter 14: On the Order of the World of Generation and the Existence of Good and Evil¹⁶⁹
- Chapter 15: On the Opinions regarding Providence and Its Types
- Chapter 16: On the Differences between People in the Continuance of Providence and Its Attachment, and the Solution to Some of the Difficulties¹⁷⁰
- Chapter 17: That the Manner of God's [Judgment] of Things Is Hidden from Us, and What Brought Some of the Philosophers to Dispute Individual Providence, and upon What Kinds of Things Providence Does Not Bring about Any Change
- Chapter 18: On God's Knowledge
- Chapter 19: On Trials¹⁷¹
- Chapter 20: On the Nature of the World to Come
- Chapter 21: To Explain Who Merits the Splendor of the World to Come and How and on What Level Will They Remain, and What was Solomon's Opinion regarding this Tenet
- Chapter 22: To Explain What Was the Reason that Our Sages Described the Reward of the World to Come in Corporeal Terms, and What Did They Intend by These Dictums, and in How Many Ways Humans Differ from One Another and the Advantage of the Righteous over Others
- Chapter 23: On the Nature of the Punishment of the Wicked in the World to Come, and We Will Introduce Here a Discussion on the Nature of the Human Soul
- Chapter 24: On the Subject of the Righteous Gentiles
- Chapter 25: On the Resurrection of the Dead
- Chapter 26: On the Promise of Redemption

Part Three: On the Work of Creation¹⁷²

- Chapter 1: On the Rivers and the Garden

167 Psalms 89.

168 Psalms 36:7; 71:19; 119:142. These verses are recited in the Sabbath afternoon service.

169 This chapter is not found in the short version.

170 Chapters 15 and 16 appear as a single chapter in the short version.

171 Chapters 18 and 19 appear as a single chapter in the short version.

172 This part has survived in both the long and short versions and they appear in *Livyat Hen: The Work of Creation*.

- Chapter 2: On Adam, Eve and the Serpent
 Chapter 3: On Image (*Zelem*) and Likeness (*Demut*)
 Chapter 4: On the Tree of Knowledge
 Chapter 5: On the Guardians of the Garden and the Tree of Life
 Chapter 6: On the Descendants of Adam
 Chapter 7: On the Descendants of Noah and the Matter of the Rods and Shepherds Mentioned by Zechariah¹⁷³
 Chapter 8: On Some of the Tales regarding the First Man
 Chapter 9: On Explaining the Saying: *Three things are beyond me; four I cannot fathom* (Proverbs 30:18)
 Chapter 10: On Creation
 Chapter 11: On the Tales regarding Creation
 Chapter 12: On the Firmament that Was Made on the Second Day
 Chapter 13: On the Size of Og and His Strength
 Chapter 14: On the Longevity of the First Generations, on the Life of Elijah, and the Explanation of the Portion: *And it came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth* (Genesis 6:1)
 Chapter 15: On the Explanation of: *The Words of Agur ben Yaqeh* (Proverbs 30:1), and the Explanation of His Saying: *Two things have I asked of You* (Proverbs 30:7)

Treatise Seven

Part One: On the Work of the Chariot¹⁷⁴

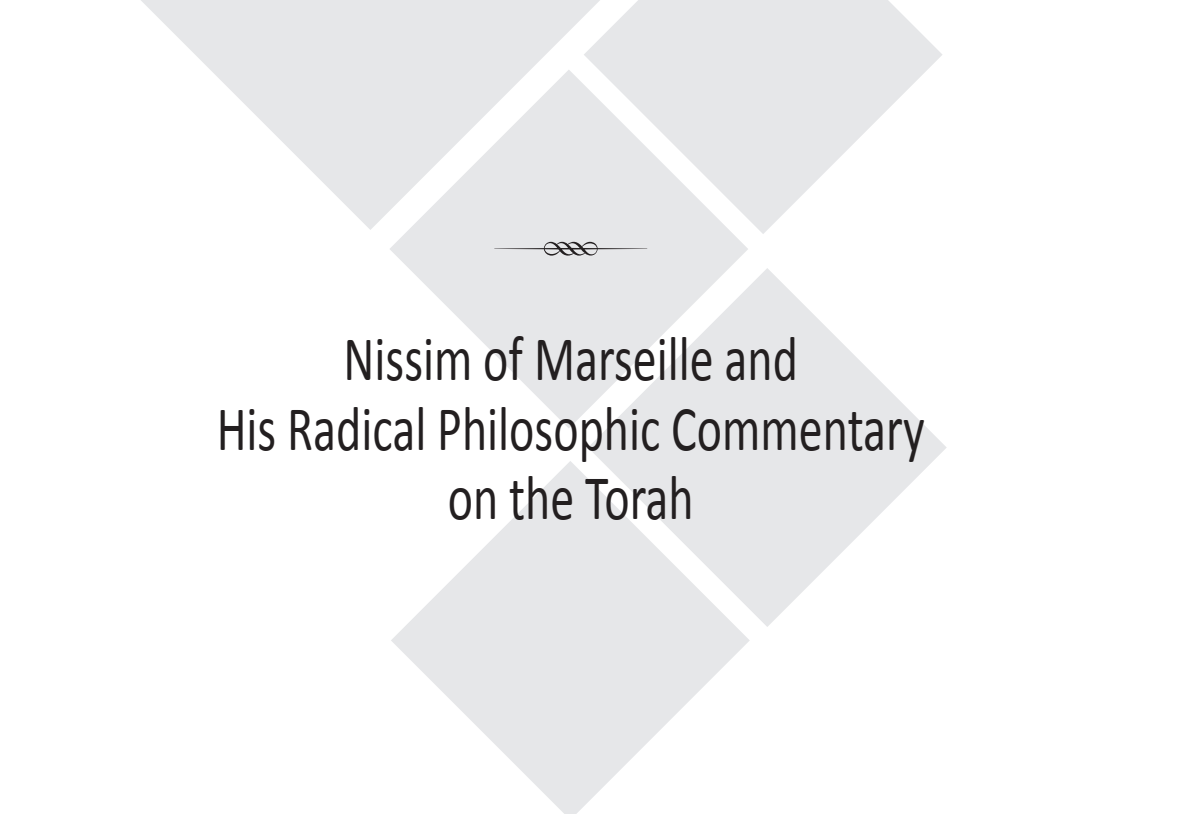
- Chapter 1: On an Introduction to the Work of the Chariot
 Chapter 2: On the Visions of Isaiah
 Chapter 3: On the Quality of the Apprehension of Elijah and His Departure from the World
 Chapter 4: On the Description of the Beasts Mentioned by Ezekiel
 Chapter 5: On the *Ofanim* and Some Matters in General that Appear in the Second Vision
 Chapter 6: On Something about the Beasts
 Chapter 7: On the Visions of Zechariah

Part Two: On the Gate of the Haggadah¹⁷⁵

173 See Zechariah 11:4-14.

174 This part has survived only in the long version, which appears in *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*.

175 In some places this part is referred to as “The Gate of the Aggadah.” Levi uses these two terms interchangeably. This part is not divided into chapters. It has survived only in the long version, which appears in *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*.



Nissim of Marseille and His Radical Philosophic Commentary on the Torah

Introduction

“The Torah has seventy faces,” observed the Sages.¹ Some commentaries attempt to ascertain the literal meaning of Torah, while others seek to uncover its mystical layer. Some are devoted to legal exegesis and others to homiletic interpretations. All these “faces” are formed from the encounter of the divine word with human thought. Despite the great differences, at times even contradictions, between these commentaries, they all represent the Torah’s manifold “faces,” since all of them are committed to the truths contained in the Torah as discerned by the human mind. Yet this raises the question of whether any commentary should be rejected as completely false and not a “face” of the Torah at all. It is this question that lay at the heart of the controversy concerning the philosophic-scientific interpretation of Torah, which came to a climax at the very beginning of the fourteenth century in Provence. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the encyclopedia reflecting this rationalist approach to the Torah, *Livyat Hēn* by Levi

1 See Numbers Rabbah 13.15.

ben Avraham, was singled out for particular condemnation by the antagonists of this approach.

Despite the controversy, the Jewish philosophers of Provence were not prepared to abandon their commitment to this “face” of Torah as its truest one. No medieval Jewish composition better exemplifies this commitment than *Ma’aseh Nissim (Work of Miracles)* by Nissim b. Moses b. Solomon of Marseille, written in the early fourteenth century.² The first part of the treatise includes an introduction and fourteen chapters that deal with a range of topics—the principles of faith, divine providence, prophecy, Mosaic prophecy, reward and punishment, and miracles. The second part contains a commentary on the five books of the Torah.

As is the case with all those belonging to the rationalist camp in Provence in this period, Nissim saw in Maimonides the teacher *par excellence*, who laid the foundation for the true philosophic understanding of Judaism. This camp, however, was divided. Some, following the lead of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, leaned toward a radical philosophic approach, one that negates any direct personal involvement of God with humanity or any intervention in nature. They interpreted Maimonides as favoring this view and presenting it in an esoteric manner. Others adopted a more moderate approach, continuing to believe in creation of the world *ex nihilo*, and in a deity who produces miracles, created the voice heard by Israel at Sinai, and dictated the Torah to Moses

2 This chapter is based primarily on the Hebrew introduction that appears in my edition of this treatise (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 2000). There I also discuss the various names given to this treatise and expand upon a number of ideas that I bring here in an abridged form. A different shorter version of this introduction appears in my “The Philosophical-Allegorical Exegesis of Scripture in the Middle Ages: *Ma’aseh Nissim* by R. Nissim of Marseille,” in *Me’ab She’arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Ezra Fleischer, Gerald Blidstein, Carmi Horowitz, and Bernard Septimus (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 297-316 (Heb.). See also my “The Torah Commentary of R. Nissim b. Moshe of Marseille: A Medieval Approach to *Torah u-Madda*,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 10 (2001): 20-36; and “Some Observations on *Ma’aseh Nissim* by R. Nissim of Marseille,” in *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism*, ed. Alfred Ivry, Elliot Wolfson, and Allan Arkush (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), 201-222, in which I append an English translation of Nissim’s commentary to the Torah portion “Mishpatim.”

word for word.³ At times Nissim leaves his readers with the impression that he favors the latter approach, and ascribes to God the ability to act outside the boundaries of nature. A closer look at the composition, however, reveals a barely concealed radical Aristotelian approach.⁴ Moreover, it becomes evident in the course of reading Nissim's treatise that its primary aim is to explain all seemingly supernatural elements in the Torah in a rationalistic manner in conformity with Aristotelian philosophy and medieval science.

The date that Nissim completed his treatise cannot be established with certainty. Joshua Heschel Schorr, who analyzed this composition in depth and published extensive selections from it in his pioneering study of 1865, was convinced that it was written during the controversy in Provence surrounding the study of philosophy and the philosophical-allegorical interpretation of the Torah at the very beginning of the fourteenth century.⁵ His hypothesis was seemingly confirmed by Meyer Brayer, who in his edition of the section on Genesis transcribed the colophon of the now lost and apparently original manuscript of this composition as follows: נכתב במתיבתא דר' נסים בן משה ממרשיליא שנת ס"ד לאלף החמישי (Written in the academy of R. Nissim b. Moshe of Marseille in the

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- 3 For Samuel Ibn Tibbon's approach and its subsequent influence on the interpretation of Maimonides, see in particular Aviezer Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87-123, and Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel Ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of Dalālat al-Hā'irīm into the Moreh Nevukhim*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007) (Heb.). Perhaps the most important protagonist of the alternate approach is Menaḥem HaMeiri. For a study of Meiri's more moderate philosophical approach, see Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000) (Heb.); and Gregg Stern, *Philosophy and Rabbinic Culture: Jewish Interpretation and Controversy in Medieval Languedoc* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
 - 4 Nissim indicates in the introduction to his treatise that he intends to reveal his views in an esoteric manner; see *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 53-54. In the course of his discussion, however, he allows his true views to emerge almost explicitly.
 - 5 Joshua Heschel Schorr, "R. Nissim b. R. Moshe of Marseille," *HeḤalutz* 7 (1865): 88-144 (Heb.). For a study of Schorr's approach, see my "The Writing and Rewriting of *Ma'aseh Nissim* by R. Nissim of Marseille," in *Écriture et réécriture des textes philosophiques médiévaux*, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse and Olga Weijers (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2006), 311-328.

sixty-fourth year of the fifth millennium [1304]).⁶ Yet there are good reasons to question this date and to conclude that an error was made in the transcription. In his treatise, Nissim cites a lengthy passage from Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences* as translated by Kalonymos ben Kalonymos. This translation was made in 1314, according to the available evidence.⁷ Nissim also refers to the activity on the part of a newly crowned king of France, his description matching that of Louis X at the beginning of his reign in 1315.⁸ It thus may very well be that the date written in the colophon of the manuscript was 5084 (1324), with the Hebrew letter "peh" (80) mistakenly read as a "samekh" (60) due to their similarity. The colophon also raises the interesting question of the nature of Nissim's academy.⁹

Of Nissim's life, nothing is known except for that which can be inferred from his treatise. Some scholars attribute to him the authorship of a philosophic commentary on Ruth, based on the fact that it opens with the words: "Nissim began by expounding," and is found immediately after *Ma'aseh Nissim* in one of the manuscripts. This identification, however, is questionable. While there are significant similarities between the two compositions, there are also notable differences as to the ideas they present and the terminology they employ.

6 Meyer I. Brayer, "Nissim of Marseille's Commentary on the Pentateuch" (DHL thesis, Yeshiva University, 1970), 3 (Heb.). The manuscript was in the possession of Brayer's family, and both he and his brother informed me in private communication that they could not locate it and that no copies of it were ever made.

7 See Moritz Steinschneider, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Nachdruck der Ausgabe, 1925), 208. See also Mauro Zonta's introduction to his edition of this treatise, *La "Classificazione delle Scienze" di Al-Farabi nella Tradizione Ebraica* (Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 1992), xxiii.

8 See Colette Sirat, "The Political Ideas of Nissim ben Moses of Marseille," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990), 54 (Heb.).

9 That is to say, was philosophy also being studied in this academy as is true of some of the later Spanish Jewish academies? On Jewish academies devoted to the study of philosophy, see Colette Sirat and Marc Geoffroy, "The Modena Manuscript and the Teaching of Philosophy in Fourteenth and Fifteenth Century Spain," in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought Through the Ages*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), 185-202.

Moreover, neither composition refers to the other one or to any other composition that the author had written.¹⁰

Nissim was well grounded in all the traditional Jewish literature—the Bible, the Talmud and midrashic literature, including the *Book of Creation* and *Sefer Bahir*, which he treats as rabbinic texts. He frequently cites from the commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra, and at times also from the commentaries of Rashi and David Kimḥi (Radak). He makes use of Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*, and borrows from the works of Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon. He relies heavily on many of Levi's exegetical comments in *Livyat Hen*, though in this case without once mentioning the author or his work by name. He apparently was also acquainted with HaMeiri's *Ḥibbur Ha-Teshuvah* (*Treatise on Repentance*), and may have been acquainted with Baḥya ben Asher's Torah commentary, though they are not mentioned by name either. It is, however, Maimonides' *Guide*, together with his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and his other writings, that exercised the most profound influence in the shaping of Nissim's thought.

On one major issue, Nissim does not follow Maimonides' lead. As is true of many of his rationalist contemporaries, he was well versed in astrology and regarded it as a practical science, as opposed to Maimonides' view.¹¹ Ibn Ezra's astrological treatise *Reshit Ḥokhmah* (*The Beginning of Wisdom*) apparently served as his main reference work in this area. The extent of Nissim's acquaintance with philosophic literature is harder to determine. In addition to Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences*, he clearly is familiar with his *The Political Regime* (known as *The Origins of Existents*). Citations from a number of Averroes' commentaries are also brought by Nissim in his treatise, including the short commentaries on *Physics*, *Metaphysics*, *De Anima* and *Parva Naturalia*. Yet Nissim refrains from entering into any philosophic discussions, with the interesting exception of his critique of Averroes for misunderstanding Avicenna's view of the manner in which existence is a

10 See my "A Fragment from a Commentary on Ruth Ascribed to R. Nissim of Marseille," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 14 (1998): 159-180 (Heb.).

11 For a study of Maimonides' approach, see, for example, Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Maimonides' Repudiation of Astrology," *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 123-158.

contingent attribute of that which exists.¹² The focus of the treatise is entirely on how Judaism is to be understood and the Torah interpreted. In this chapter, I will provide a summary of his approach to some of the central topics he touches on in his treatise and bring a number of examples from his commentary to illustrate its radical, rationalistic nature.

Political Philosophy

Nissim, following Maimonides' lead, accepts the Aristotelian view that the perfection of the intellect is the final goal of the human being.¹³ Moral virtue plays an essential role in aiding the human being to attain this goal. The restraint of one's desires for corporeal pleasures, in particular, helps one to direct the faculties of the soul to the attempt to perfect one's intellect, in addition to aiding in the preservation of one's physical health. In the case of many individuals, however, the desire for pleasure is so strong that it prevents them from appreciating the value of ethical virtue and conducting themselves accordingly. For this reason, people require political leadership. Nissim provides an interesting explanation to the Aristotelian dictum: "Man is by nature a political animal"¹⁴—that is, only through a leader who legislates moral laws and instills fear in the hearts of the inhabitants of the country can the individual be guided to the moral virtues by means of which one

12 For a study of this issue in medieval thought, see Fazlur Rahman, "Essence and Existence in Avicenna," *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1958): 1-16; Alexander Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), 108-127. See also Aviezer Ravitzky, "Possible and Contingent Existence in the Exegesis of Maimonides in the Thirteenth Century," *Daat* 2-3 (1978): 67-98 (Heb.).

13 Much of the discussion that follows is reminiscent of Maimonides' approach, particularly as it finds its expression in *Eight Chapters* and *Guide* 2.39-40; 3.27-28, 54. I have dealt extensively with Maimonides' approach to human perfection and the role of ethics in its attainment in *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999). For an analysis of Maimonides' political philosophy, see my "Maimonides' Political Philosophy," in *Cambridge Companion to Moses Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 193-220. For a further study of Nissim's political thought, see Sirat, "The Political Ideas of Nissim ben Moses of Marseille," 53-76.

14 See *Politics* 1.2, 1253a. Aristotle's *Politics* was not translated into Arabic or Hebrew in the medieval period, yet this dictum was widely known and cited. Maimonides, for example, mentions it in *Guide* 2.40.

preserves one's body and intellect.¹⁵ In addition, Nissim brings the well-known explanation that a human being is political by nature because he is in need of society to fulfill his physical needs.¹⁶

Nissim's approach appears to be directly influenced by Alfarabi's discussion in *The Political Regime*, which explains the necessity for a ruler as follows:

Since what is intended by man's existence is that he attain supreme happiness, he—in order to achieve it—needs to know what happiness is, make it his end, and hold it before his eyes. Then, after that, he needs to know the things he ought to do in order to attain happiness, and then to do these actions. In view of what has been said about the differences in the natural dispositions of individual men, not everyone is disposed to know happiness on his own, or the things that he ought to do, but needs a teacher and a guide for this purpose. Some men need little guidance, others need a great deal of it. In addition, even when a man is guided to these two [that is, happiness and the actions leading to it], he will not, in the absence of an external stimulus and something to arouse him, necessarily do what he has been taught and guided to. This is how most men are. Therefore they need someone to make all this known to them and to arouse them to do it. Besides, it is not in the power of every man to guide others nor in the power of every man to induce others to do these things. . . . The supreme ruler without qualification is he who does not need anyone to rule him in anything whatever, but has actually acquired the sciences and every kind of knowledge, and has no need of a man to guide him in anything. He is able to comprehend well each one of the particular things that he ought to do. He is able to guide well all others to everything in which he instructs them, to

15 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 62-63. The source of this view is Plato's *Republic* 4, 434a.

16 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 63-64. See *Guide* 2.40; cf. *Guide* 3.27. In these chapters, Maimonides stresses the social function of ethics—i.e., it enables people of far different temperaments to function together in order to ensure the satisfaction of their corporeal needs—as opposed to its immediate contribution to the perfection of the individual. The latter idea, however, is also present in Maimonides' writings; see my *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 159-188. In the introduction to *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides brings still another explanation of the political nature of the human being, which also has its source in Aristotle's thought—from a psychological perspective, human beings require the companionship of others.

employ all those who do any of the acts for which they are equipped, and to determine, define, and direct these acts toward happiness.¹⁷

Nissim's depiction of the perfect ruler is clearly in the spirit of the view of Alfarabi when he writes: "He possesses a very strong rational faculty, which always is subservient to his final form. For the true ruler and the one for whom leadership is appropriate, is the one who is perfect in his character traits, always aims for true happiness, and does not require the instruction of any other person. He leads others and his intellect leads him."¹⁸

The promise of divine reward and punishment plays a crucial role in the governance of a state. The threat of the human leader's punishment is not sufficient to insure the adherence to morality, since there is no way for a leader to know what happens in private, nor can he place a policeman in every home, as Nissim notes.¹⁹ Furthermore, it is not possible for human leaders to reward in a just manner all those who carefully refrain from doing evil. Thus there is a need for supernatural reward and punishment, "so that a person will fear God privately just as he fears other individuals openly."²⁰

This view raises the fundamental problem in interpreting Nissim's approach: is he of the opinion that the belief in supernatural reward and punishment is a necessary belief for the governance of a state as well as a true one, or does he regard it as a necessary but false one when understood in its literal sense? Maimonides had previously drawn the distinction between true beliefs and those that are necessary for governance, bringing as an example "our belief that He, may He be exalted, is violently angry with those who disobey Him and that it is therefore necessary to fear Him and to dread Him and to take care not to

17 Translated by Fauzi M. Najjar, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 35-36. For a study of Alfarabi's political thought, see Miriam Galston, *Politics and Excellence: The Political Philosophy of Alfarabi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

18 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 64.

19 *Ibid.*, 66.

20 *Ibid.*, 66.

disobey.”²¹ Easily discerned is the connection between Nissim’s approach and that of Maimonides; harder to discern is their true view on this matter. Maimonides explicitly rejects the view that one should ascribe to God the trait of anger. Anger is an affectation of the soul that is tied to the body, and all such traits must be categorically negated in regard to God.²² The question remains whether Maimonides hints here at the view that God does not punish in a supernatural manner, but it is crucial to impart to the masses belief in such punishment in order to ensure their obedience. In the case of Nissim, this view more clearly emerges from a number of his discussions, though he is careful never to state it explicitly. Few are those in his view who “accept what is true because of its truth, do what is good because of its goodness, and grasp what is right because of its rightness.”²³ Hence supernatural acts or miracles are required in order to strengthen the belief of the masses in divine revelation—that is to say, God’s command to the prophet to bring His message to the people—and accept the opinions and actions communicated by the prophet. The miracles also forestall the attempts to negate these opinions and actions by human reason. As we shall see below, Nissim does not deny the occurrence of miracles, as is true also of the phenomenon of revelation, yet neither does he affirm their supernatural quality as specific acts intended by God. Rather he views them essentially as naturalistic events employed, or at times brought about, by the prophet in order to accomplish his ends. In a similar naturalistic manner, he approaches the seemingly supernatural rewards and punishments promised in the Torah.

For example, he explains as follows the divine promise of rain as a reward for observing the commandments:

Regarding the fall of rain or its cessation, it is possible that this belongs to the category of the promises that are necessary for all those who lay down a law, because the masses and the entire nation will be impressed thereby, and they *shall hear and fear and no longer*

21 See *Guide* 3.28: 512.

22 Ibid. 1.36, 54. For a study of this point, see Hannah Kasher, “The Myth of ‘God’s Anger’ in the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Eshel Beer Sheva* 4 (1996): 95-111 (Heb.).

23 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 75.

act wantonly [Deuteronomy 17:13]. The lives of human beings and all their beasts are dependent upon the rain. It is also not improbable that this belongs to the category of promises that are necessarily fulfilled. One finds this promise only in regard to bowing down before other gods and to sacrificing to the heavenly bodies. Those who do so are the ones who abandon the laws of nature and its decrees, while trusting in and relying upon the making of images, such as talismans and similar objects, in order to bring down the supernal forces. They always seek the aid of objects with extraordinary properties, which suffice [to accomplish their desired ends] in accordance with their opinion. They thereby are negligent in working the land, and they make no effort in planting and harvesting in accordance with what is proper and required. Consequently, *the land will be utterly desolate* [Isaiah 6:11], and *not yield up its fruit* [Deuteronomy 11:17]. Therefore the rain will not be of any benefit, for labor completes nature, just as nature completes labor in some matters. Hence there is no wonder in the fact that the purpose of the natural rain is the labor of sowing.²⁴

Nissim interprets the divine punishment of withholding the rain as referring not to the actual cessation of rain but to a situation that produces similar results due to the practice of idolatry.²⁵ In general, he divides the promises of rewards and punishments into three categories: those which the intellect shows necessarily result from one's actions; those which are necessary to inculcate in order to maintain the religion; those which belong to the first category when understood in a non-literal manner and the second category when interpreted literally.²⁶

The rewards promised for obeying the social laws are treated by Nissim as occurring in a naturalistic manner, even though the masses see in these rewards the hand of God. His political-social acuity can be discerned in his explanation of how God's blessing to one who helps the poor—*You shall surely give him and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him because for this thing God your Lord shall*

24 Ibid., 120-121. It is interesting to note that Nissim's argument is based on Maimonides' argument against astrology as found in his epistle on this subject; see below.

25 Maimonides also mentions this punishment in *Guide* 3.30, which comes in his view to counter the promises made in the idolatrous religions that these practices will cause the rain to fall. He leaves it an open question, however, if he believes that God fulfills this promise in a miraculous manner.

26 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 118.

bless you in all your works and in all that to which you put your hand (Deuteronomy 15:10)—comes about:

For by this he shall attract the hearts of the poor and extinguish the fire of their jealousy of him and his wealth. He will remain secure in his house and in his field and not fear for his flocks, grains, and fruits. He will procure them as servants who will serve him faithfully, and will be assisted by them to complete his labors. For the poor need the rich and are his right hand. For this reason, Scripture linked the blessing with his labors, not with the natural, for it did not say: “The land shall give its yield and the trees of the field their fruit,” but only: “in all your works and in all that to which you put your hand.” . . . One should do all that is possible to be aided [in this manner], and by this will he be blessed, and he should not rely solely on the reward for this commandment and remain idle. It is sufficient if he is blessed and succeeds in all the work of his hands.²⁷

The theme that social justice naturally leads to a thriving society while injustice inevitably leads to the breakup of society, defeat at the hands of one’s enemies, and exile recurs throughout Nissim’s treatise. In a similar manner, the long life promised to one who honors his parents is explained by the example one sets for one’s children, who in turn will help care for him and preserve his life.²⁸ In all these cases Nissim thereby shows how the reward and punishment need not be understood in a supernatural manner.

Certainly the ultimate supernatural event in Jewish tradition is the handing down of the Torah to Moses from heaven. Nissim hints in a number of passage that this belief is not to be understood in a literal manner, and that Moses himself legislated the Torah on the basis of the perfection he attained.²⁹ Following Maimonides’ lead, he sees the fundamental difference between the Torah and other legislations as lying in the fact that the latter are concerned solely with the “welfare of the body”—that is to say, social order—while the Torah is concerned also with the perfection of the intellect. In short, the divinity of the Torah is discerned by its purpose rather than its immediate agent.

²⁷ Ibid., 458-459.

²⁸ Ibid., 338-339.

²⁹ For a further discussion of this point see below and see chapter 9, 332.

Only a law that leads to human perfection and not just social order deserves the epithet “divine.”³⁰ Maimonides’ view that the commandments of the Torah reflect a perfect “equibalance,” neither excessive nor deficient in the demand to worship God or in the restraint of one’s appetites, is also echoed by Nissim. This perfect equibalance is a further reason why the Torah is called Divine Law.³¹ While Nissim explicitly attacks the view that the Torah should be traced to a human agent rather than God, insofar as all that it commands and teaches is shown to be mandated by the intellect,³² at the same time he alludes to his esoteric opinion that the belief in the supernatural origin of the Torah is intended for the masses. For example, he elaborates upon the ultimate perfection attained by Moses, which leads him to attempt to perfect others and to protect them from the evils that they bring upon themselves through poor choices, particularly in following their corporeal appetites. To illustrate this point, Nissim refers to the commandments to limit sexual intercourse, food, and drink, implying thereby that they were formulated by Moses himself.³³ This view is presented almost explicitly in a subsequent passage, where Nissim sees it as the view hinted at also by the Sages:

Another citation commenting on the first verse: *And He [God] called to Moses* [Leviticus 1:1]. “It is written above in the section on the Tabernacle: *As the Lord commanded Moses*. This is analogous to a king who commanded his servant: ‘Build me a palace.’ On each item the servant built, he would write the name of the king—on the walls, pillars, and ceilings. Similarly, when the Lord said to Moses: ‘Build me a tabernacle’—on each item that he built he would write: *As the Lord had commanded Moses*. God said: Moses paid me the highest honor and here I am inside and he is on the outside. Call him to enter before Me inside. For this reason it is said: *And He called to Moses* [Leviticus Rabbah 1.7].” The Sages alluded here to a great secret, in accordance with what we hinted in this chapter. That is to say, the command in general was from God to Moses’ intellect. He

30 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 67; cf. *Guide* 2.40. For a further discussion of Maimonides’ approach to this issue see above, chapter 2, 23-25.

31 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 68, 160-162; cf. *Guide* 2.39.

32 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 172-173; for a further discussion of this point, see below.

33 *Ibid.*, 100.

related to his intellectual part the matters in a general way—all the directives of the Torah, its commandments and prohibitions—in order to maintain the corporeal part and to lead it, and that it should always be directed to what is suitable and salutary, and distanced from what is harmful to the body and the soul. And Moses would write by each detail: “As God commanded Moses,” in order to honor God, and to elevate these matters in the eyes of the Israelites, in order that they fear God and refrain from sin.³⁴

This midrash is in fact quite a radical one, for it implies that God issued the general command to build a tabernacle and it was Moses himself who planned all the particulars of the tabernacle and ascribed each of them to the divine command. Nissim takes this idea much further and sees it as true of the Divine Law as a whole. That is to say, the command to Moses was to legislate a law for the people, and it was Moses himself who formulated all of the particular commandments and ascribed each of them to God. Moreover, Nissim does not see this command coming to Moses by supernatural means, such as by way of a creation of a divine audible voice. Rather it was attained by the intellect of Moses. Nissim hints thereby that it resulted from a prophetic emanation, which he treats as a naturalistic phenomenon.³⁵

Insofar as the Torah is the ideal legislation in Nissim’s view, its teachings are essentially in harmony with philosophy, except for those that are necessary in order to ensure the faith of the masses. Yet it is precisely these irrational teachings that make it susceptible to rejection on rationalist grounds. Nissim sees theology as providing the means for rationally defending these problematic teachings and upholding the religion in the face of the rationalist critique. He cites from Alfarabi’s *Enumeration of the Sciences* the various apologetic theological approaches one should adopt to achieve this end.³⁶

Nissim summarizes the purpose of the Torah as follows: “The intent of the Torah and its purpose is twofold: to perfect the rationalists

34 Ibid., 177-178.

35 For a further discussion of Nissim’s approach to prophecy, see below, 187-190.

36 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 70-71. Cf. Alfarabi, *Enumeration of the Sciences*, chapter 5. This chapter was translated into English by Fauzi M. Najjar and appears in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 27-30.

in true opinions, and the masses in fine virtues and characteristics, so that the political community will be rectified and ordered, and the perfect among them will merit life in the world to come.”³⁷ While Maimonides’ stance in *Guide* 3.27 is evident in this summary, the differences are also glaring. Maimonides obscures his view on who will merit eternal life. Nissim, on the other hand, is quite explicit on the point that the perfect alone will, for only they are capable of perfecting their intellect. Moreover, he sees them as acting morally due to the dictates of their intellect, hence the commands of the Torah are more crucial for the conduct of the masses who are under the sway of their appetitive faculty.

The tension in the fact that the Torah is designed primarily to lead those capable of human perfection in the right direction, but must constantly compromise with the intellectual limitations of the masses in order to ensure their obedience and moral behavior, is evident in Nissim’s thought, just as in the case of Maimonides.³⁸ Furthermore, the masses’ misunderstanding of the true teachings of the Torah and their attacks on the philosophers serve to undermine the attainment of the Torah’s ultimate objective—a view that appears to underlie much of Maimonides’ life work in his attempt to rectify this situation and refine the people’s beliefs. This leads Nissim to offer a scathing critique of the popular understanding of Judaism and strongly defend the loyalty of the Jewish philosophers to religious practice against their detractors, a loyalty he traces to their superior understanding. At the same time, he shows his appreciation of the masses’ dedication to the religion despite—or because of—their fundamental ignorance, hence the need not to disturb their naïve faith:

It is fitting that the masses be left alone, and they [be allowed to] continue to maintain their thoughts, and not be budged from all that they imagine. For the women and mass of fools who are immersed in their beliefs in the imaginary and always believe in the impossible, nonetheless possess something good—they uphold the Torah and commandments with all their might, and they are exceptionally

³⁷ *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 149.

³⁸ See my discussion of this issue in *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 189-223.

stringent in the observance of the practical commandments. The reason for this is their forementioned imaginary fear. They are willing to subject their bodies and souls to great dangers in order to fulfill the Torah and its commandments. . . . If one informs the masses of all the matters as they truly are, their intellects will become confused. They will fall into a deep despair and experience great perplexity, which may lead them to heresy and to abandon the religion. The women, and men following their path, observe the commandments solely with their limbs since they do not understand the reasons for the practical commandments, and for what end they were commanded. They labor to observe them scrupulously, without knowing their purpose and utility. They are like a burden-carrying mule that knows nothing of the purpose of its labors and the utility of its activity. The rationalists (*maskilim*) observe the commandments with the requisite scrupulousness because of their purpose and utility. They observe the commandments with their limbs, and even more with their thought and heart, for every practical commandment comes either in order to teach a correct opinion or to reject a false opinion; to help a person acquire a noble quality or distance the person from an opprobrious one.³⁹ Just as it happens that the masses, due to their fear, do not sin and they are scrupulous in their observance since they do not know anything, it happens at times that they perform the less significant commandments, abandon the more precious ones and are lenient in their observance of the weighty ones because of their limited discernment. For this reason, people are mistaken when they judge the rationalists as not being committed to the practical commandments. They say of them that they are solely committed to rational opinions and true beliefs. In reference to the masses, they say that they are the ones committed to the practical commandments and they are the pious ones (*ḥasidim*). How greatly mistaken are those who say this, for as our sages have already maintained: “The ignorant one is not pious” (*lo ‘am ha’aretz ḥasid*) [Mishnah Avot 2.5].⁴⁰

The Torah, for Nissim as for Maimonides, is the quintessential practical expression of political philosophy. Given the great difference in people’s temperaments, hence the great wisdom required in order to mold them into a harmonious polity, and even more important, the great difference in their intellectual ability, the Torah continuously balances the need to purify the thought of its adherents in order to

³⁹ See *Guide* 3.27-28, 31.

⁴⁰ *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 115-117.

guide them to perfection and the need to safeguard them from experiencing a crisis of faith that could easily lead to heresy.

The Principles of Judaism

Perhaps the most significant innovation of Maimonides in advancing the Torah's objective as he understood it was in formulating the thirteen principles of Judaism, and in treating them as legally binding upon all Jews.⁴¹ Despite the fact that no comparable list of dogmas existed in Judaism prior to Maimonides' time, he makes no attempt to defend his list or to indicate the criteria he used in determining what constitutes a principle. In order to fill this lacuna, Nissim devotes a chapter of his treatise to discuss the nature and purpose of these principles.⁴² He defines what constitutes a principle of religion along lines borrowed from natural philosophy:

Every religion has cornerstones and independent principles. If one envisions their absence, the religion would be annulled. Every natural and humanly created object has parts that facilitate its existence and define it, some which are in common with other objects and some which distinguish it from them in an essential manner. It also has special and accidental qualities, which are not required for its existence, insofar as they are not essential to it. Similarly, the Torah and the religion have essential principles. Other inessential matters are also appended to it.⁴³

Nissim does not dispute Maimonides' list; his discussion is primarily a commentary on it. He opens his discussion by raising two questions concerning these principles: "Are they mandated by the intellect or are they set down on the basis of faith alone, and in what respect are they

41 Maimonides presents these principles at the end of his *Commentary on the Mishnah, Introduction to Pereq Heleq*. For a study of Maimonides' thirteen principles, its antecedents and subsequent influence on Jewish thought, see Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

42 For a study of Nissim's approach, see also Barry Mesch, "Nissim of Marseille's Approach to the 'Iqqarim'," *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 3 (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 85-92.

43 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 148.

principles of our religion, the divine and perfect religion of Moses?”⁴⁴ As we shall see, Nissim regards this list as primarily political in nature, though some of the principles clearly serve a crucial pedagogical function.

Nissim’s tendency toward categorization finds its expression in his approach to this subject, and mirrors his categorization of the rewards and punishments set down in the Torah:

We say that they are divided into parts: some are proven by the intellect; some are not known by the intellect but are necessary and established on the basis of faith alone; and some are composed of both these facets. Eight are known by the intellect, and they are: the existence of God; His unity; He is not a force in a body; it is not proper to praise and worship another; He knows the actions of human beings and nothing is unknown to Him; the belief in prophecy; it is not possible that there will be any change in the laws of the religion, its commandments, beliefs, and benefits, for it is beneficial and good at all times, and the truth does not change; the belief that there will come a time that redemption, salvation, and kingship will return to Israel. Three are necessitated and established on the basis of faith: the resurrection of the dead; creation; the difference between the prophecy of Moses and that of the other prophets. Two are composed of both these facets, and they are: Torah from heaven; reward and punishment. All these are essential beliefs, for if one of them is absent the Torah would not be what it is—that is, the Divine Law of Moses—and its form which its Giver intended will be corrupted.⁴⁵

All these principles, Nissim points out, are in the realm of opinions, “for actions serve as the ‘matter’ for opinions and beliefs, in order to impress upon the hearts of the people that which is intended by them, that it should not depart from them.”⁴⁶ He goes on to explain the

44 Ibid., 149.

45 Ibid., 149.

46 Ibid. This view essentially follows the one that Maimonides presents in his approach to the commandments in *The Guide of the Perplexed*; see below, chapter 10. Compare also to Ibn Ezra’s approach in *Yesod Mora ve-Sod Torah*, ed. Joseph Cohen (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), chap. 7, 140. Ibn Ezra writes as follows: “Pay heed to my words and know that all the commandments written in the Torah or accepted on the basis of tradition or the enactments laid down by the

importance of each of the principles in upholding Judaism, while obscuring his opinion regarding the truth of the ones that are laid down on the basis of faith alone.

The first three principles that are known by the intellect—the existence of the one incorporeal deity—lie at the root of metaphysical knowledge. They should be considered principles, “since the primary intent of the Torah and its goal is to set straight the human intellect with true opinions, which are the primary beliefs for all other true beliefs.”⁴⁷ As for belief in prophecy, the philosophers verify the existence of this phenomenon. It is to be considered a principle in Nissim’s view, since without it there is no belief in the prophecy of Moses, by means of which the Torah was transmitted. In regard to God’s knowledge of particulars, Nissim is well aware from Maimonides’ discussion in the *Guide* that the Aristotelian philosophers disagree with this view. He accepts Maimonides’ arguments that God’s perfection must include such knowledge, though in a manner we are incapable of grasping, for otherwise He would be subject to privation. God knows all particulars by way of His Self-knowledge as the cause of all that exists, hence this knowledge is not external to His essence.⁴⁸ Nissim considers this belief a principle due to its necessity in upholding the belief in reward and punishment, which in turn serves as a principle in every religion, for without it the masses would not observe the precepts.⁴⁹ The principle that God alone is worthy of worship is also regarded by Nissim as a belief rooted in the intellect, a view that Maimonides expresses in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah* but appears to retract in his *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry.⁵⁰ Nissim deems this belief a principle of Judaism insofar as it comes to eliminate the worship of figurines or talismans, with the intent of bringing down forces from

patriarchs, even though most of them involve deed or speech, all of them are for the purpose of rectifying the heart.”

47 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 150

48 See *Guide* 3.16, 19-21.

49 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 152. Nissim thereby alludes to the reason why this belief immediately precedes reward and punishment in Maimonides’ list and does not immediately follow the other beliefs directly relating to God.

50 See *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 88.

heavenly bodies at fixed times. The worship of these figures, in turn, reinforces belief in the eternity of the world as against the principle of creation, and serves as a substitute to engaging in all the natural tasks required to produce sustenance and protect one's land—an argument taken from Maimonides' epistle to Montpellier condemning the belief in astrology.⁵¹ Finally, this principle prevents the masses from believing the contemptible falsehood that the talismans themselves are gods.⁵² The two remaining principles that Nissim considers to be known by the intellect are explained in an interesting manner. The belief that the Torah will not be abrogated or undergo any form of change is based on the view that it is of the utmost perfection and any change thus would be a defect, a view that Maimonides himself voices in *Guide* 2.39. Nissim stresses that the commandments were designed to benefit the "chosen masses" in every period and place, as opposed to human legislations which are promulgated in accordance with specific temporal circumstances. It is clear in his view that this belief should be designated a principle, for it ensures the continued existence of the Torah.⁵³ The final principle in this category, the coming of the messiah, is also proven by the intellect, based on the Aristotelian principle that "the possible in the things that exist for eternity must be realized."⁵⁴ Since Israel will exist eternally, as the prophets foretell,⁵⁵ and the coming of the messiah is possible, this event therefore must occur. Nissim considers this belief to be a principle, since:

This hope will join us together in the observance of our religion, and unite us in our belief, and strengthen our hands, and make us into

51 For an English translation of this epistle, see Ralph Lerner, "Maimonides' Letter on Astrology," *History of Religions* 8 (1968): 143-158. Maimonides' essentially stresses the belief in determinism entailed by the belief in astrology, in addition to the fact that astrology is a false science and promotes the belief that the planets are deities.

52 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 152-154. Compare Maimonides' discussion of the origin of idolatry in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry 1.1-2. Interestingly, Nissim adduces naturalistic explanation why at times this worship does help one to learn the future by helping to strengthen the individual's imaginative faculty.

53 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 155-156.

54 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 9.4, 1047b.

55 See Isaiah 66:22.

one nation, though we are dispersed to all corners of the world and to the distant islands. Due to this promise and hope, we will not stumble and despair in the harshness of our exile, convert from our pure religion and assimilate with the other peoples.⁵⁶

The second category of principles—those based on faith alone—include not only resurrection and the unique nature of Mosaic prophecy, but also the creation of the world. All three of these principles revolve around the notion of a divine will that is not limited to the workings of the natural order. Nissim surprisingly ignores the philosophic arguments adduced by Maimonides for creation,⁵⁷ focusing solely on the religious reasons for maintaining this belief. While Nissim echoes Maimonides' argument in *Guide* 2.25 that without belief in creation one cannot believe in the principle that the Torah is from heaven, his formulation of this idea is highly significant:

Without the belief that the Torah came from heaven in the way that is generally accepted, the masses will not believe in what is appropriate to believe and will not accept chastisement. . . . In laying down a beginning and creation of that which God created, it follows that *God, the Lord is truth* [Jeremiah 10:10], for by reason of [the belief in] creation, they will believe what the intellect mandates as true. Or it means that they will believe in truth that God is the Lord and He gave them this Torah, and consequently they will accept His decrees and commandments.⁵⁸

Nissim thereby alludes to the view that the belief in creation is necessary for the masses, for only by means of this belief will they be prepared to believe in the existence of God—a belief that is shown to be true by the intellect—as well as in the divine origin of the Torah, which in turn is the basis for accepting its commandments. His discussion suggests that he does not regard this as a true belief, but one that is politically and pedagogically necessary. As we have seen, his discussion of the

56 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 156.

57 For a discussion of this issue, see above, chapter 3. In an earlier chapter of his treatise, Nissim indicates that the intellect does not disprove creation; see *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 83.

58 *Ibid.*, 157.

Torah suggests that God was not its immediate author and this belief too is necessary for the masses, while the wise accept the Torah because of its perfection. This interpretation is further strengthened by his treatment of the other two principles that belong to this category.

The importance in believing in the categorical difference between the prophecy of Moses and that of the other prophets, insofar as the prophecy of Moses did not involve the imagination,⁵⁹ is crucial in accepting the commandments in accordance with their literal meaning and not viewing them as parables.⁶⁰ The reason Nissim sees this as a principle that is accepted on the basis of faith alone, he explains as follows:

The philosopher, though he believes in the existence of prophecy and verifies its words, does not believe in “Go and speak to,”⁶¹ and in novel acts of [divine] will. He also does not believe that prophecy reaches the human species except by the mediation of the activity of the imagination, and that its distinctive subject and purpose is knowledge of future events and specific hidden existing things. The apprehension of truths, rejection of falsehood, choice of the good and fine activities, and abandonment of their opposite in accordance with what is grasped by the intellect—all this according to them results from the activity of the human intellect while awake, and this is its intended purpose.⁶²

In a subsequent discussion, Nissim stresses the divine volitional or supernatural element even in non-Mosaic prophecy—a view that he traces to Maimonides’ stance in *Guide* 2.32 regarding the withholding of prophecy from the worthy⁶³—in contradistinction to the philosophers’ completely naturalistic approach. Yet there too he subtly alludes

59 See, for example, *Guide* 2.45. This trait underlies most, if not all, of the differences between the two types of prophecy that Maimonides posits in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Principles of the Torah 7.6. See also below, chapter 9, 316.

60 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 158, 173.

61 That is to say, in the prophetic mission as commanded by God.

62 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 159. That the distinctive characteristic of normative prophecy is divination is a view also voiced by Maimonides despite his stress on the intellectual perfection of the prophet; see *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Principles of the Torah 10.3. For a further discussion of this point, see below, chapter 8, 282-284.

63 For a discussion of this chapter, see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 222-230.

to the view that this stance was prompted by political-pedagogical considerations.⁶⁴

The resurrection of the dead, Nissim notes, belongs to the great miracles that are impossible by nature.⁶⁵ The significance of this belief lies in the fact that, “without it, all the masses will not hold on to the good or refrain from evil. For this reason all the religions teach it and lay it down [as a principle].”⁶⁶ In light of Nissim’s subsequent discussion of miracles, it is clear that he regards this belief too as politically necessary rather than true.

The final category consists of the two principles that have two facets: one that is posited on the basis of faith alone, and the other that is known also by the intellect. These principles are: Torah from heaven, and reward and punishment. The content of the Torah is shown to be in harmony with the intellect and its utility is manifest, while the notion that Moses received it from God and recorded what he heard without changing a single word is known on the basis of faith alone. Similarly, there are rewards and punishments to the body and to the soul that are shown to be true by the intellect, while others are miraculous and are known by faith alone.

While Nissim treats all the principles as essential in upholding the religion, it is interesting to note that some of them are subordinate to others. Belief in creation, for example, serves to bolster belief in Torah from heaven and the existence of God. Belief in prophecy is necessary for the belief in the unique prophecy of Moses. In general, it appears that most of the principles are formulated for the sake of the masses in order to ensure their obedience. This is true not only of all the principles rooted in faith alone, but even many that are mandated by the intellect in Nissim’s view, such as belief in the coming of the messiah. In light of the Torah’s dual goal as posited by Nissim—to guide the rationalists to intellectual perfection and the masses to moral perfection—we may conclude that most of the principles promote the latter

64 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 178-179. For Nissim’s discussion of prophecy, see below, 187-190.

65 *Ibid.*, 140.

66 *Ibid.*, 157.

goal, while those pertaining to the essence of God primarily promote the former.

One wonders, however, how Nissim—or the Sages and Maimonides according to his view—could insist that all Jews, even the rationalists, accept each one of these beliefs or else be treated as heretics, if he in fact did not believe in their literal truth. Nissim alludes to this problem in the course of discussing the principle that the Torah is from heaven, while dealing with the case of one who openly expresses the opinion that the Torah originated in the human intellect, and it is the intellect that is given from heaven. Nissim’s stance on this issue is exceptionally noteworthy:

This one is also a heretic and it is fitting to eliminate him from the world. For this reason, to my way of thinking, the language of the Sages is: “One who *says* that the Torah is not from heaven” [Mishnah Sanhedrin 10.1], and not: “One who *believes*.” For by speaking alone he harms the multitude and commits heresy, even if he believes as we do that the Torah is of great utility. . . . For the speech that issues forth from him is ruinous and destructive, to him and to others, a severe transgression and most blameworthy. For this reason the Sages said: “One who *says*.” Even if he interprets and rectifies his speech in any manner whatsoever, it will not help him to avoid being labeled a heretic. He causes others to weaken their hope in the Torah, and thwarts God’s intent, since Moses His prophet wanted “for Israel to be righteous, hence he multiplied for them the Torah and commandments” [Mishnah Maqot 3.16], and commanded in His Name what he commanded.⁶⁷

An astute reader of this passage could hardly fail to grasp Nissim’s intent, though Nissim carefully conveys his position so as to avoid being guilty of heresy in accordance with his own definition of this grievous sin. It is not the truth that is heretical but the proclaiming of truth to those who cannot handle it, which would serve only to weaken their commitment to the divine Law.

67 Ibid., 160. Note that in the quote in the Mishnah, Moses is not mentioned; “The Holy One blessed be He wanted Israel to be righteous”

Providence

From all of Maimonides' esoteric positions, the one that comes closest to being presented almost explicitly is his view regarding individual providence. A careful reading of Maimonides' position reveals that God does not exercise providence directly, but the instrument of divine providence is the human intellect itself. The more the individual develops the intellect, the more the intellect protects him from physical evils by guiding him in all his actions and directing him to pursue only what aids him to attain final perfection.⁶⁸ It shows him, for example, how to preserve his health and live in harmony with others, what is truly important in life and what has only imaginary value and should not concern him. We already saw that some of the Provençal philosophers prior to Nissim, such as Samuel Ibn Tibbon and his son Moses, discerned Maimonides' naturalistic approach to this subject.⁶⁹

Nissim continues in this vein in the presentation of his own views.⁷⁰ The intellect is the "angel" that protects the individual. The individual of perfect intellect—that is, the one who attains prophecy—is further protected since he can also foretell harmful events about to take place and take steps to avoid their evil effects. In this manner, Nissim interprets Psalms 91, the Song of Mishaps, and ties providence not only to prophetic divination but also to astrological knowledge:

For He will save you from the fowler's trap [Psalms 91:3]. The intellect will inform you and counsel you, which will enable you to protect yourself from *the fowler's trap*—that is, from changes [resulting from] the order [of the stars], which is like a hidden trap that suddenly ensnares. You will know by virtue of your wisdom their matter, path, changes in their situation, conjunction, and opposition, and what they determine for good or for bad, and you will take counsel and flee, *a prudent man foresees evil and hides himself* [Proverbs 22:3], *hide yourself for a short moment until the wrath shall pass* [Isaiah 26:20]. In this manner one will be saved and the order will not be

68 *Guide* 3.17-18. See above, chapter 3, 46-47; see also below, chapter 11, 412-415.

69 See above, chapter 4, 96; see also below, chapter 11, 415, 420-421.

70 For a study of Nissim's approach to providence, see also Abraham S. Halkin, "Nissim ben Moscheh on Providence," in *Hommage à Georges Vajda: Études d'histoire et pensée juive*, ed. Gerard Nahon and Charles Touati (Louvain: Éditions Peeters, 1980), 219-225.

destroyed. Solomon said: *He who keeps the commandment shall know nothing evil, and a wise man's heart knows the time and judgment* [Ecclesiastes 8:5]. That is to say, by keeping the commandments and knowing the times and the judgments of the order [i.e., astrology], one will be saved from many troubles. Furthermore, the person who adheres to his intellect and always contemplates God and His acts and wonders, not temporal vanities, will be illuminated by the Active Intellect with knowledge of future events, which he will then inform [others]. Thereby he will save himself and all those who heed him, who fear the word of God. This is the highest level of the human intellect. . . . A single prophet can save and straighten [the path of] tens of thousands.⁷¹

Even passages in the Bible that suggest divine miraculous protection should be understood in a naturalistic manner:

A thousand may fall on your left side, ten thousand on your right, but it shall not reach you [Psalms 91:7], That is to say, many will kill each other in disputes and wars between them, *but it shall not reach you*, since you are at peace with everyone, and do not bring about [social] rifts. Thus no one will touch you and lift their hands against you. It is not necessary to say that you will not *fall*, that is to say, die, in the manner that a thousand and ten thousand fall on your left side and your right, since they also will not injure you or strike you, and no one will touch you.⁷²

God, according to Nissim, does not change the order of nature, but human beings learn to protect themselves and others from the occasional harm that results from the order. By means of the intellect, the individual can save himself from the three types of evil that Maimonides lists in *Guide* 3.12: natural disasters; evils individuals inflict upon

71 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 90-91.

72 *Ibid.*, 96. Maimonides' treatment of this Psalm in *Guide* 3.51 perplexed Samuel Ibn Tibbon, since it suggested miraculous providence, as opposed to his other views in the *Guide* on this subject. See Zevi Diesendruck, "Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence," *HUCA* 11 (1936): 341-366. Nissim, following Moses Ibn Tibbon and Levi ben Avraham, understands these verses in a naturalistic manner.

each other; and evils that one inflicts upon oneself.⁷³ Prophetic divination offers further protection against these various types of evil.

In the end, however, physical evils inevitably result due to the nature of matter, yet one should not attach to them any importance. Following Maimonides, Nissim sees this as the ultimate lesson that Job learns.⁷⁴ Thus the most important task of the intellect is to direct the individual to true perfection, the perfection of the intellect and conjunction with the supernal world:

And show him My salvation [Psalms 91:16]. For as long as the body is alive and its bodily powers have not yet been extinguished, this person will realize the salvation of the intellect. That is to say, with the conjunction with its intelligible it reaches its perfection and the experience of spiritual pleasure, akin to the World to Come, as in the saying of the sage: “In withdrawing (*be-bitbodedi*)⁷⁵ with my soul, I removed my body from it and remained like a soul without a body. I contemplated the world of the angels and thought myself as one of them. I experienced a wondrous felicity that mouths are incapable of expressing and hearts are incapable of apprehending. Then I attained a bit of salvation of the soul.”⁷⁶

73 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 98. Nissim divides the first type of evil into two categories: those resulting from the privation characterizing matter and those resulting from the influences of the stars.

74 *Ibid.*, 194-195; see *Guide* 3.23. For a study of Maimonides' interpretation of the story of Job, see Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43-77.

75 For a study of this term in medieval thought, see Moshe Idel, “*Hitbodedut* as Concentration in Jewish Philosophy,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 7 (1988): 39-60 (Heb.); see also idem, “*Hitbodedut* as Concentration in Ecstatic Kabbalah,” *Daat* 14 (1985): 35-81 (Heb.). For Gersonides' use of this term see Sara Klein-Braslavy, “Prophecy, Clairvoyance, and Dreams and the Concept of *Hitbodedut* in Gersonides' Thought,” *Daat* 39 (1997): 23-68 (Heb.).

76 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 99; cf. 407. The citation is from the *Theology of Aristotle*. For the Arabic version of the *Theology of Aristotle* in which this passage appears, see Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *Plotinus apud Arabes* (Cairo, 1955), 22-23; for an English translation of this passage, see Geoffrey Lewis, *Plotini Opera*, ed. Paul Henry and Hans-Rudolf Schwyzer (Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1959), vol. 2, 225. The *Theology* is based on the latter books of Plotinus' *Enneads*. This passage depicting Plotinus' ecstatic experience appears in *Enneads* 4.8.1; for an English translation see Plotinus, *Enneads*, trans. Stephen Mackenna (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), 357. For Judah al-Harizi's medieval Hebrew translation of this passage, see Paul Fenton, “Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera and the *Theology of Aristotle*,” *Daat* 29 (1992): 28 n. 8 (Heb.). For a general study of the *Theology of Aristotle* in Hebrew sources, see Paul

Prophecy

As we have seen in the previous section, prophecy is in essence a form of divine providence, inasmuch as it enables one to know the future and warn others of impending evils. These evils result from the changes brought about by the movements of the heavenly bodies. For this reason, Nissim draws an integral connection between astrology and prophecy, though the astrologer attains his knowledge by observation and the prophet by way of emanation from the Active Intellect.⁷⁷ Drawing upon his philosophic predecessors, Nissim describes non-Mosaic prophecy as follows:

The prophecy of the rest of the prophets consists of knowledge that comes by way of a divine emanation, descending from the Separate Intellect to the intellectual faculty by mediation of previous knowledge—either regarding matters pertaining to the prophet himself or those upon whom his thought is focused and are already known to him together with their affairs—and from the intellectual faculty to the imaginative faculty, till impressions of future particulars are impressed upon it. The activity of the intellect always involves universal knowledge, and the activity of the imagination—particularly alluding to personal matters. What the imagination attains from the faculty of the intellect is then secured by it, as is always the case [also] regarding what a person apprehends with his senses, which after its disappearance from them is secured by the imagination and impressed upon it. The goal of this emanation is to protect the human species from every adversary that it is not in the power of the theoretical intellect to know and guard against, as though this emanation completes what was deprived of the theoretical intellect at

Fenton, “The Arabic and Hebrew Versions of the *Theology of Aristotle*,” in *Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jill Kraye, W. F. Ryan, and C. B. Schmitt (London: Warburg Institute, 1986), 241-264. The last sentence of the citation brought by Nissim does not appear in any of the above mentioned sources.

77 Gersonides, Nissim’s contemporary, also posits an integral relationship between astrology and prophecy. For both thinkers, prophetic knowledge is essentially a superior form of astrological knowledge—a position already advanced by Ibn Ezra in his commentary to Exodus 33:21. For a detailed analysis of Gersonides’ approach to prophecy, see Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 316-424. For a study of divination in Gersonides’ thought, see also Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Without any Doubt: Gersonides on Method and Knowledge* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 221-323.

creation in regard to the safeguarding of the human species at the appropriate time in accordance with its natural power.⁷⁸

The activity of the rational and imaginative faculties in divination is described by Nissim also in an earlier passage in his treatise:

Know that the future that is about to occur is impressed more easily upon the intellect of the prophet or in the thought of the individual as a universal [premise]. The intellect then conveys it to the imagination, which grasps it as particular. The imagination gives and receives—it gives to the intellect what it receives of the particulars impressed upon the sensory organs and the intellect receives them as universals, and it receives from the intellect the universal causes and the imagination takes them as particulars regarding the one upon whom one's thoughts and mind are focused. The matter thereby appears to him in a nocturnal dream. If his imagination is stronger, at times it brings the matter to the senses in a vision while awake.⁷⁹

While the influence of Maimonides' description of prophecy in *Guide* 2.36 is evident in these passages, just as important is Averroes' approach as found in his *Epitome of Parva Naturalia*, where he writes as follows:

. . . it cannot be denied that the Separate Intellect endows the imaginative soul with the universal nature that the individual that comes into being possesses, that is to say with a comprehension of its causes, and the imaginative soul will receive it as particular by virtue of the fact that it is in matter. It may receive the individual of that which has been comprehended, in reality, or it may receive something similar to it. Just as the Intellect endows one with the universal perfections of the soul and matter receives them as particulars, so here too the Intellect endows the imaginative soul with the final perfection as a universal, and the soul receives it as a particular. It has therefore been made clear that the Active Intellect endows only the primary perfections of the particular faculties of the soul, that is of the five senses and of the imaginative faculty, for that which endows them with the final perfection are the sense-objects. But in the spiritual perception which occurs during sleep or the like, it will

78 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 163-164.

79 *Ibid.*, 92. The similarity to Gersonides' account is striking, though that of Gersonides is far more detailed in its explanation of this phenomenon and the role played by each of the faculties.

endow the imaginative soul with the final perfection. Just as the skilled physician among us can predict what will arise in the body of Zaid and in his soul at a determinate time by two premises: one, an universal intelligible premise, and the other a particular sensible premise, so it is with this prediction. The knowledge thereof is completed through the universal, which is endowed by the Intellect, and through the particular thing that is conveyed to the imaginative soul and is related to that universal object.⁸⁰

While Maimonides in his account of prophecy defines this phenomenon as an emanation from the Active Intellect to the rational and then imaginative faculty, whereas in non-prophetic divination the emanation is to the imagination alone,⁸¹ he does not explain the nature of this emanation or the precise role of each of the faculties. It is not even clear from his account if the rational faculty plays any role at all in the divinatory ability of the prophet, or if its role is restricted to the prophet's attainment of theoretical knowledge.⁸² Averroes in the passage quoted above also appears to posit an immediate connection between the Active Intellect and the imagination in the attainment of the knowledge of the future. Nissim, on the other hand, denies an immediate connection between the two. The emanation from the Active Intellect reaches first the rational faculty of the individual in the form of universal knowledge and from there emanates to the imagination, which applies it to specific individuals.⁸³ Thus the person must already possess awareness of the individuals or groups in question, a view stressed also by Averroes.⁸⁴ Furthermore, the imagination dresses this knowledge in images borrowed from the prophet's

80 Harry Blumberg (trans.), *Averroes: Epitome of Parva Naturalia* (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1961), 46-47.

81 See *Guide* 2.37.

82 There is good reason to maintain, however, that for Maimonides the rational faculty contributes to the prophet's ability to know the future too. For more on this issue, see below, chapter 8, 274-275.

83 Gersonides agrees with this view, though in the case of non-prophetic divination he posits an immediate connection between the imagination and the heavenly bodies rather than with the rational faculty. Nissim's discussions too suggest that there is an immediate connection between the forces of the spheres and the imagination of the non-prophetic diviners.

84 See *Epitome of Parva Naturalia*, 47.

everyday experience.⁸⁵ Just as Maimonides posits that prophecy can only come to one possessing all the requisite perfections when the individual's soul is not overcome by sorrow or anger but in a joyous state, Nissim sees the state of the imagination as playing an important role in this regard. As we shall see below in the discussion of the reasons of the commandments, some of them in his view serve as aids in preparing the imagination to receive divinatory knowledge by arousing it to this end and helping it to achieve the state conducive to attaining such knowledge.⁸⁶

Miracles

The final subject Nissim addresses in the first part of his treatise is that of miracles. In his discussion till this point, he hints at the view that the miracles recorded in the Bible do not in fact result from the guiding hand of God in history. Three additional options for how to understand the tales of miracles were available to him from his philosophic sources: 1) to reject a literal understanding of the stories; 2) to view miracles as natural events that the prophet was able to predict in advance and utilize to his advantage; 3) to view them as events that the prophet himself had the ability to bring about. While Maimonides obscures his view as to the precise role of God in the performance of miracles, he clearly rejects the actual occurrence of some of them. His discussion in *Guide* 2.35, for example, shows that he certainly did not believe that the sun and moon literally stopped in their tracks for Joshua. Other miracles occurred in a vision of prophecy rather than in reality according to him, such as Balaam's talking donkey.⁸⁷ Maimonides does not state explicitly that many of the miracles would have occurred naturally even without a prophet, but he does indicate that many are possible by nature,⁸⁸ which suggests that he may in fact have thought that this was the case. The view that the prophet himself is the immediate agent of

85 Cf. *Guide* 2.46.

86 For a further discussion of Nissim's approach to prophecy, see below, chapter 8, 307-310, and chapter 9, 330-332.

87 See *Guide* 2.42; 3.22.

88 See the end of his *Treatise on Resurrection*.

miracles—one which was already presented by Abraham Ibn Daud and Ibn Ezra, following in the footsteps of Avicenna—is not mentioned by Maimonides at all, but there is some basis for maintaining that he secretly entertained this view.⁸⁹

All of these alternative explanations are accepted by Nissim. He divides the miracles into two categories: those that occurred through the mediation of a prophet or other exceptional individual and those that did not. The first category consists of two sub-categories: 1) the prophet was alone when the miracle occurred; 2) the prophet was in the company of others. The latter sub-category is further divided into two classes: 2a) the miracle resulted from an activity performed by the prophet by means of divine instruction; 2b) the miracle was an event that the prophet was able to predict would occur at a specific time. Tales of miracles in which no prophet was involved are also divided into two sub-categories: 1) those that are to be interpreted as occurring as described; 2) those whose depiction should not be understood literally, but as hyperbole or a parable.

The miracles that occurred while the prophet was alone, such as the story of Moses and the burning bush, should be interpreted as occurring in a prophetic vision according to Nissim, and they do not have any reality outside the soul of the prophet which produced the vision. Those which occurred in the presence of others were either performed by the prophet himself by virtue of his intellectual perfection, or they were rare natural events that the prophet was able to predict. The first type of miracle belonging to this category is exemplified by Moses' ability to sweeten the water of Marah, and even to transform a staff into a serpent and to produce terrifying voices at Mount Sinai, while many of the plagues in Egypt exemplify the second. Some of the miracles that occurred without the mediation of a prophet can be explained in a naturalistic manner; thus one should understand them literally and not as parables. This, for example, is the case with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, which resulted from an earthquake. Others are parables, such as the serpent's speech to Eve.

⁸⁹ I discuss this point in further detail below, in the appendix to chapter 9.

In order to signal to his readers in the course of his subsequent commentary on the Torah how he understands each of the miraculous events recorded there—and, in fact, his commentary focuses almost exclusively on all the tales and phenomena that appear to be miraculous or supernatural—he arbitrarily assigns one of the words for miracles to each of his sub-categories. He notes that he will use the term *nes* to indicate an event that occurred as a result of the action of the prophet; *mofet* to refer to an event that the prophet was able to predict; *pele'* to an event that occurred while no prophet was present; and *ot* to an event that occurred in a prophetic vision and not in reality.⁹⁰ Nissim's explanations of the various miracles are in basic harmony with Aristotelian physics, though in some cases he grounds them also in astrology and the special properties of certain objects. In the next two sections of the chapter, we shall see some examples of these explanations.⁹¹

Reasons for the Commandments

As in the case of Maimonides, Nissim views each of the commandments as contributing to the moral and intellectual perfection of society. He accepts most of Maimonides' explanations for the manner in which the commandments contribute to these perfections, but he is not entirely comfortable with Maimonides' historical approach to many of them—i.e., that they were legislated primarily in order to combat the beliefs and rituals of the idolatrous religions of old. Nissim supplements this reason with timeless symbolic and, where he thought possible, naturalistic reasons, as we shall see in more detail in chapter 10. His break with Maimonides on this issue is nowhere more evident than in his approach to sacrifices, which Maimonides treats as a type of historical compromise. The Law in Maimonides' view accepts the inferior form of worship to which the Israelites were accustomed, while it attempts to wean them away from it by limiting its scope.⁹² After approvingly citing Halevi's approach in *Kuzari* 3.53 regarding the wondrous

90 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 213.

91 For a further discussion of Nissim's approach to the miracles performed by Moses, see also below, chapter 9, 331-332.

92 See *Guide* 3.32; for a discussion of Maimonides' approach, see below, chapter 10.

effects of the sacrifices on the soul of the individual, Nissim writes regarding the view of Maimonides:

Maimonides' opinion that the sole reason for sacrifices is to remove them [the Israelites] from those they were performing for the demons and *ba'alim* and *'ashtoroth*, is insufficient. The practice of sacrifice is ancient, and they performed it for God and it was pleasing to Him. . . . If there were no utility in the sacrifices themselves, except to remove them from idolatrous practices, why was it commanded to them for all generations, and why did God command to always perform two daily sacrifices? It would have been sufficient for that generation [at the time of the Giving of the Torah] or for two generations [to be given this commandment], as is the case with many commandments in the Torah that were not for all generations, only for a fixed period, such as the service of the Tabernacle, and others. Moreover, if it were not possible for it to be [instituted] except for all generations, why did God command to multiply them [by sacrificing] twice a day? It would have been sufficient [to sacrifice] once a year! How difficult and farfetched from the standpoint of the reason [is the view] that all these numerous and esteemed activities are without utility. From this it is seen that the practice of sacrifices is intended for its own sake and is of great utility—namely, that the Indwelling would then envelop the priests in order to impart to them a supernal power by means of the sweet savor. . . . Though the special properties of these acts are unknown to us, they were known to God and Moses His prophet who commanded them.⁹³

The supernal power granted to the priests is particularly important for the ability to divine the future and avoid impending evils, as Nissim states in a previous discussion exploring the reason underlying Moses' request to Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to go to the mountain of the Lord in the desert in order to sacrifice there:

The matter of sacrifices was well known in antiquity to all who attempted to discern the future, whether they were those who had priestly duties, the priests of the “high places,” or the *ba'alim* and *'ashtoroth*, the makers of figurines and talismans—that is to say, they were aided by the sweet savor. For the savor of burnt meat and fats have a wondrous special property for this. This was ancient [practice], as proven in the case of Balaam, as well as his predecessors,

93 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 361.

such as Abel, Noah, and Abraham. Adam too was said by the Sages to have offered sacrifices In addition, they [the sacrifices] prepare the thought and arouse the imagination to this end [of knowing the future], so its practitioners would not be diverted by extraneous thoughts. Perhaps for this reason one's thought can [legally] invalidate the sacrifice.⁹⁴ For if one sacrifices without the proper intent and thinks extraneous thoughts, it is possible that he will not attain the future that he seeks to know.⁹⁵

Nissim also offers additional reasons regarding animal sacrifice. It provides a means of livelihood for the priests, thereby enabling them to devote their time to spiritual matters and to be teachers of Torah. It also reminds individuals that their flesh will disintegrate just as the flesh of the sacrificed animals, and hence they should concentrate on what remains after death—namely, the intellect. Together with this, there are symbolic lessons to be learned from the parts of the animals that are burned on the altar, such as the liver, which symbolizes one's inclination to physical pleasures. The burning of the fat too symbolizes the need to rid oneself of what is superfluous, in addition to its being a poor source of nourishment, and thus should not be eaten. These symbolic reasons in turn encourage the individual to engage in repentance.

Nissim's belief in astrology, and even the efficacy of figurines and other practices involving astral magic, leads him to address the question of why the Torah prohibits their use if they are beneficial. Maimonides had already argued that all the practices associated with astrology that are prohibited by the Torah are in fact false,⁹⁶ while Nahmanides appears to hold the view that the Torah prohibits even useful practices when they negatively affect one's trust in God.⁹⁷ The debate between the proponents of the efficacy of astral magic and their detractors continued long afterward in Provence, in Spain, and elsewhere.⁹⁸

94 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Invalid Sacrifices 13.1.

95 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 207.

96 See Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*: 'Avodah Zarah 4.7. See also his *Book of Commandments*, prohibition no. 32.

97 See Nahmanides' commentary to Genesis 17:1 and Deuteronomy 18:13.

98 For an in-depth study of this subject, see Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) (Heb.).

Nissim, despite his high regard for Maimonides, essentially adopts Naḥmanides' position on this issue. Yet as opposed to the more lenient ruling on the part of one of the leading rabbinic authorities of his time, R. Solomon Ibn Adret (Rashba), who was a disciple of Naḥmanides, Nissim advocates a very stringent prohibition against all such practices:⁹⁹

For this reason the Torah prohibited and warned: *You shall not make with me gods of silver, neither shall you make for yourselves gods of gold* [Exodus 20:20]. The intent in saying *with me*—inasmuch as my Indwelling is found among you, you have no need for those figurines. . . . What Scripture added in saying: *neither shall you make for yourselves*—means, in my opinion, that it admonished them and said: Do not bring down supernal powers by means of the figurines that are known to you, that is to say, in order to cure known illnesses. According to this, anyone who makes a figurine, whether for knowing the future or for curing a certain illness, violates a prohibition. It is possible that *pe'or* was a figurine that was made in order that everyone who relieves himself before it receives a power and a special property to discharge [from his body] vapors and residue. . . . Similarly, the images of *teḥurim* are figurines that cure hemorrhoids. If one asks: Why did God prohibit us these benefits, whether to know the future or as medications to illnesses? The answer is: For this will lead to immeasurable harm to the masses, in that they at the end will come to believe that these figurines are deities.¹⁰⁰

Nissim maintains that from all these ancient practices that were employed to divine the future, the only one that the Torah permitted was sacrifice.

Nissim sees vestiges of the astrological rituals of old that were rejected by the Torah as surviving in Christian practice, affording him an opportunity to polemicize against this rival religion.¹⁰¹ He treats some of the Christian practices as even more contemptible than those

99 Rashba allowed the use of figurines for medicinal purposes. Both Abba Mari and HaMeiri were also strongly opposed to this ruling. See Stern, *Philosophic and Rabbinic Culture*, 146-150.

100 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 167-168.

101 On anti-Christian philosophical polemics in medieval Provence, see Daniel J. Lasker, "Christianity, Philosophy and Polemics in Jewish Provence," *Zion* 68 (2003): 313-332 (Heb.).

of the idolaters, since the ancient rituals at least had some efficacy. Even the beliefs of the Christians are of greater falsehood than those of the idolaters in his view—one that stands in sharp contrast to a more positive attitude toward Christian belief exhibited by some of the other Provençal thinkers, such as HaMeiri.¹⁰² For example, in explaining the prohibition against passing one's son and daughter through the fire,¹⁰³ Nissim does not bring Maimonides' explanation,¹⁰⁴ though he too connects it with idolatry, but cites a different one that he had heard instead:

There is one who said that the ancient custom of the Christians, who on their well-known festival on the summer solstice light great fires in the markets and streets, is a vestige remaining from this root, for they do it without knowing the reason why. It is possible that this custom predates them, [its purpose being] to announce that at this time begins the period that is hot and dry like the nature of fire, and to inform them to behave accordingly. For the ancients, though they made talismans and worshipped them, were wiser than those who are [living] today, for they [the latter] believe an impossible, contemptible, worthless and false belief in regard to the Deity, which invalidates itself.¹⁰⁵ They annulled the earlier paths and held on to something more contemptible, as though fleeing from the embers into the fire. Similarly, there are matters predating the Christian faith, and they are the figures and talismans [that were set up] in certain known places, mountains and hill tops, for [the purpose of] either foretelling the future or curing certain known diseases. They would go there always or at fixed times, when the power of the star or stars would assist that figure.¹⁰⁶ When those who lay down the faith of the Christians arrived, they were not able to wean the masses from the obvious benefits [of these practices], but only to bring them to their faith, *and from the high places they did not turn aside* [I Kings 15:14]. Over time they

102 On HaMeiri's approach to Christianity, see, for example, Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), 114-128.

103 See Deuteronomy 18:10.

104 See *Guide* 3.37.

105 That is to say, God took the form of a human being, Jesus, which is impossible from a philosophical perspective.

106 Nissim's explanation here of the belief in the efficacy of talismans is similar to the one Maimonides brings in *Guide* 3.37, with the critical difference that Maimonides ascribes to them no value whatsoever.

would attribute this [the benefits] to certain known saints. The ancient benefits soon were eliminated, the figurines became obsolete, and the masses would be left with a strong imaginary belief in the saints. Since their faith was strong as was the strength of their trust in them [the saints] due to their stupidity, it appeared to them that they [the saints] would perform miracles. I write this in order that you should not be deceived when you hear tales of their miracles.¹⁰⁷

In this associative manner, Nissim ties up the prohibition of passing one's children through fire with the festival of the Birth of John the Baptist, still observed in Europe on June 23 to this very day, with the lighting of great bonfires, which Nissim knew of from contemporary practice in his own day. This in turn leads him to contrast astrological practices, in which he sees some utility, with the practices involving the worship of the relics of saints, whose origin was in these ancient astrological practices, but were of no benefit at all.¹⁰⁸

The notion that certain practices and objects possess special qualities underlies Nissim's explanation of the most paradoxical of commandments—that of the red heifer:

The matter of the red heifer that purifies the defiled and defiles the pure—is like the matter of the non-edible poisonous drugs that undoubtedly heal the sick and afflict the healthy who are in no need of medication. As for the matter of the ashes of the heifer, cedar wood, scarlet, and hyssop, which are burnt with it—who can inform us [the reason for this] aside from God and Moses His prophet? Know that the special properties are many, and many of them are hidden from us, for what we know of them is by way of experience over time, not by way of logical deduction.¹⁰⁹

This explanation is tied to the view shared by many of the Provençal Jewish philosophers that impurity refers to things that are physically harmful. Dead bodies physically contaminate things in which they are

107 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 461-462.

108 For a study of this issue, see Judah Galinsky, "Different Approaches towards the Miracles of Christian Saints in Medieval Rabbinic Literature," in *Ta Shma: Studies in Judaica in Memory of Israel M. Ta-Shma*, ed. Avraham Reiner et al. (Alon Shevut: Tevunot Press, 2011), 195-219 (Heb.).

109 *Ma'aseh Nissim*., 421.

in contact, and many commandments are designed to protect from this contamination or cleanse it.¹¹⁰ The symbolic meaning of the ritual involving the ashes of the red heifer is also presented by Nissim in the continuation of his discussion, for the same commandment often has a myriad of reasons for its legislation. It should be stressed that he regards the symbolic reasons as part of the Law's initial intent and not as later "poetical conceits" introduced by the rabbis, as Maimonides labels many of the explanations in this category.¹¹¹

Additional Ideas in Nissim's Commentary on the Torah

Nissim's rationalistic approach finds its expression not only in his interpretation of the stories of the Torah but also the homilies of the Talmudic Sages. As in the case of Maimonides and Nissim's philosophic predecessors in Provence, he understands these homilies as esoteric, philosophic-scientific interpretations of the esoteric ideas in the Torah. Earlier in the chapter, we encountered one of the most radical examples of this approach in his interpretation of Moses' active role in the legislation of the Torah and how the Sages also alluded to this view. Even with the opening story of the Torah Nissim's exegesis reflects a similar approach.

Following in the footsteps of Maimonides, Nissim sees the biblical story of creation as focusing on the earth and its parts.¹¹² Thus the sun, moon and planets were not actually created on the fourth day after the appearance of dry land and vegetation, but the story depicts the stage of existence of the earth in which the heavenly bodies and their influences on it are discernable.¹¹³ Nissim, who appears to incline toward the view that the world is without a temporal beginning, interprets the descriptions found in each day as indicative of their causal and natural order, while leaving the question of whether they refer also to temporal

110 See below, chapter 10, 381-382.

111 See *Guide* 3.43.

112 See *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 215-249; cf. *Guide*, 2.30. For an in-depth analysis of Maimonides' approach, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1987) (Heb.).

113 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 234-235.

order.¹¹⁴ He further maintains that even if one interprets “day” in the story of creation as a temporal period, one still should not regard it the description of what occurred on each day as referring to a twenty four hour period, but to a much longer period of time.¹¹⁵ Nissim follows his philosophic predecessors in regarding Aristotle’s *Meteorology* as the most important source for understanding the natural processes taking place in the sublunar world that underlie the biblical story of creation. Maimonides in his interpretation of the Account of Creation had noted: “Reflect, if you are one of those who reflect, to what extent he has made clear and revealed the whole matter in this statement, provided that you consider well, understand all that has been demonstrated in the *Meteorologica*, and examine everything that people have said about every point mentioned in that work.”¹¹⁶ In this passage, Maimonides refers specifically to Rabbi Akiva’s warning to his compatriots in their ascent to *pardes*: “When you come to stones of pure marble, do not say: Water, Water, for it is written: *He that speaks falsehood shall not be established before My eyes* [Psalms 101:7] (Ḥagigah 14b).”¹¹⁷ Maimonides in this manner alludes to the view that the story does not deal with a heavenly journey but is a parable for the scientific study of the world—in this case, an understanding of the different levels of the earth’s atmosphere, which is the firmament (*raqi’a*) in the biblical account. Moreover, he shows how the Talmudic homilies should be interpreted as esoteric philosophic elaborations upon this account.¹¹⁸ The Jewish philosophers of Provence, beginning with Samuel Ibn Tibbon, the translator of Aristotle’s *Meteorology* as well as Maimonides’ *Guide*, essentially accepted Maimonides’ approach, while presenting different interpretations of the details of the story, as well as providing more examples of how to interpret various rabbinic homilies pertaining to it.¹¹⁹

114 Ibid., 222-225.

115 Ibid., 243-244.

116 *Guide* 2.30: 353.

117 Ibid.

118 For an analysis of Maimonides’ comments on this issue see Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation*, 160-168.

119 See Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Ma’amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, ed. Mordechai Bisliches (Pressburg: Anton Edlen v. Schmid, 1837), esp. chapter 20, 122-162. See also Levi

Their fundamental assumption was that the biblical account should be understood in accordance with the Aristotelian view of the laws of nature and that the rabbinic homilies follow the same path. This assumption governs Nissim's own interpretation.

The point at which the Torah's account regarding the beginning of humanity should be understood as true on the exoteric level—that is, historically true—and not only on the esoteric one, was not easy for the philosophers to determine. While none of them rejected the historicity of the biblical patriarchs, or even Noah and his descendants, they were not of one mind on the question of Adam and Eve and their children. In his interpretation of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Maimonides is concerned with the esoteric level of the story—that is to say, to understand the story as a parable for human perfection and the loss of perfection, or more accurately, the state of perfection in contrast to the human being's natural state of lacking perfection. The various figures in the story—Adam, Eve, and the serpent—represent different faculties of the soul, while the two trees represent different types of knowledge.¹²⁰ Maimonides, however, does not indicate whether he rejects the historicity of Adam and Eve and their progeny, though it is clear that he does not accept the literal truth of the Garden story. Nissim, who leans toward the view of the eternity *a parte ante* of the world, tends to see the story of the life of Adam and Eve and their progeny solely as a parable, though he does not completely dismiss the possibility of the existence of these individuals at some point in history, as he notes: “Similarly, the three sons of Adam—Cain, Abel, and Seth—are a parable, or if they in fact existed and were born to Adam, the names they were called hint and allude to the three perfections of the human being.”¹²¹ These perfec-

ben Avraham's extensive interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis and rabbinic homilies pertaining to it in *Livyat Hen: The Work of Creation*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2004), chapters 10-12, 208-301 (Heb.).

120 For an extensive analysis of Maimonides' approach to the Garden of Eden story see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1986) (Heb.).

121 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 271.

tions are those of acquisition (Cain), moral virtue and proper leadership (Abel), and the perfection of the Intellect (Seth). The killing of Abel by Cain thus represents the victory of the appetitive faculty over moral virtue, while the perfection of the intellect personified by Seth is the true perfection of the human being.¹²²

On the extraordinary longevity of the ancients as recorded in the Torah, Nissim offers two explanations, the first in the name of Maimonides, which accepts the Torah's account in a literal manner:

Maimonides has already written in chapter 48 of the second part [of the *Guide*] that only those individuals who were mentioned lived so long a life, whereas every [other] person lived only the natural, usual duration. The anomaly in the individual in question may be due to numerous causes: either as a result of his nutrition and regimen, or by way of a miracle and an anomaly that occurred [resulting in] a wondrous strengthening of nature. Therefore, it is of the type [of miracle] that I labeled *pele*.¹²³

Perhaps because Nissim was not entirely satisfied with Maimonides' approach, he brings in addition a non-literal, political-historical interpretation:

There are those who interpreted the life span [of each of these individuals] as referring to the persistence of his *nomoi* and regimen during the period of time mentioned, whether during his lifetime or after his death. For it is possible that these were famous individuals who legislated laws and *nomoi*, and others would act in accordance with their traits, as well as adopt their practices regarding food, drink, and dress. After the period of time mentioned, it is possible that all this was forgotten and people chose a different path. Or, one may say, no one arose during this period of time who was comparable to the individual in his level of knowledge of how to lead the people of his generation. At that point someone comparable in rank

122 Ibid., 271-272. Cf. *Guide* 1.7.

123 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 273-274. That is to say, it is a story that does not involve a prophet and one should understand it literally. The chapter Nissim cites from the *Guide* is in accordance with Judah Al-Ḥarizi's translation. In Ibn Tibbon's translation, this issue is discussed in chapter 47. Nissim makes use of both translations in his treatise, though he relies more heavily on that of Ibn Tibbon.

arose, who adhered to this individual's thought and intent [in leadership], and the former individual's spirit alighted upon him in the manner that the spirit of Elijah alighted upon Elisha. Even if the latter one who arose never saw the former and did not live in his period, it is possible that he learnt from his treatises or meditated upon the words that were received in his name¹²⁴

Nissim's explanation is taken from Levi's *Livyat Hen*, who himself cites it in the name of Moses Ibn Tibbon.¹²⁵ Nissim appears to favor this interpretation, since he brings rabbinic homilies that support a non-literal interpretation of the number of years certain individuals are reported to have lived. As long as people follow in the path of a certain individual, Nissim comments, he is said to live all those years.¹²⁶

While Nissim does not question the historicity of the subsequent stories in Genesis that clearly do not involve prophetic visions, such as Noah and the flood and the building of the Tower of Babel, he continues his tendency to interpret them in a naturalistic manner. The stories in Exodus provide a greater challenge, since the supernatural dimension in them is even more pronounced. In Nissim's view, Moses' unique state and superior knowledge allowed him either to predict and utilize rare natural events or learn the manner of bringing them about. All the plagues in Egypt are explained by Nissim in this manner. The killing of the first born is regarded by him as a rare form of pestilence, from

124 Ibid., 274. Alfarabi's view of successive ideal lawgivers is evident in this interpretation.

125 See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Work of Creation*, 324-325. Moses Ibn Tibbon brings this interpretation in his *Ma'amar ha-Taninim*; see *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, Avraham Israel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 241 (Heb.). Levi criticizes Maimonides' approach limiting such long lifespans to only a few individuals, bringing in its stead the possibility of a different naturalistic explanation of this phenomenon, which also allows us to understand it literally. He traces the shorter lifespans of the later generations to physiological changes in their physical makeup; see *Livyat Hen: The Work of Creation*, 318-322; see above, chapter 5, 130. For a study of this issue in medieval Jewish exegesis, see Frank Talmage, "So Teach Us to Number our Days: A Theology of Longevity in Jewish Exegetical Literature," in Frank Talmage, *Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver*, ed. Barry Walfish (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1999), 172-185.

126 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 274-275. Nissim cites Maimonides' interpretation of "to bear children" in *Guide* 1.7 as referring also to the instruction of an individual.

which the Israelites were spared by virtue of remaining in their homes and burning the paschal offering, which helps purify the pestilential air. The blood on the doorposts served a similar purpose, as well as to remind the Israelites not to leave their houses. It also helped fortify their spirits so they would not be frightened to death by what was happening around them.¹²⁷

The splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the manna are treated by Nissim as exceptionally rare natural events, while the bitter waters were made drinkable by the properties of a special tree known to Moses by virtue of his prophetic knowledge.¹²⁸ The fire from heaven that consumed the sacrifices at the consecration of the Tabernacle was brought about by Moses. This same fire killed Nadav and Avihu, who were unaware of its secret, and whose death for their disobedience was necessary in order to instill in the masses the proper reverence for the Tabernacle.¹²⁹ Even the seemingly unique supernatural event of the hearing of the voice of God at Sinai was in fact the voice of Moses himself, in Nissim's view; Moses' voice was greatly augmented by a natural object he found on the mountain.¹³⁰ Nissim sees this action on Moses' part as a necessary subterfuge in order to instill awe in the heart of the masses so that they would observe the ideal law that he lay down.

As can be seen from most of the examples above, the dominant tendency in Nissim's thought in approaching the Torah's accounts of supernatural events is to treat them literally, but in a natural manner. This allows Nissim to preserve the historicity of the Torah, which is crucial for Jewish belief, since it allows God to be treated as the agent of these events even though the philosophers and masses understand the divine involvement in a far different manner. However, Nissim is also prepared to treat some crucial events as occurring solely in a vision of prophecy, as did Maimonides in the case of Balaam's donkey.¹³¹

127 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 311, 314-315.

128 *Ibid.*, 318-324.

129 *Ibid.*, 369-370

130 *Ibid.*, 333. For a translation of this passage, see below, chapter 9, 350-351.

131 *Ibid.*, 426; *Guide* 2.42; 3.22. See also above, 190.

Aside from the redemption from Egypt and revelation at Sinai, perhaps no event is more important from the standpoint of Jewish tradition than the Binding of Isaac. Abraham's response to the divine command was seen throughout Jewish history as the ultimate paradigm for complete love of God. To question the historicity of this event could be seen as undermining the foundation of Jewish faith, despite the very problematic aspects of God's command and Abraham's response. Even Maimonides treats this event as having actually occurred,¹³² despite the fact that stories in which God or an angel speak to individuals are normally regarded by him as happening in a prophetic vision.¹³³ Nissim also understands the stakes involved in this story, yet does not refrain from alluding to his view that the entire story is in reality a report of a vision experienced by Abraham, a view he sees hinted at by Ibn Ezra. Abraham's vision is certainly indicative of his internal state and the complete devotion he feels to God, for whom he is prepared to sacrifice that which is dearest to him, but it is not indicative of actions that he actually committed. I would like to conclude this chapter with Nissim's comments on this story, for they provide another excellent example of the manner in which he reveals his true views on sensitive issues and tries to show how these were the views of the Sages, while he still slightly veils them for the benefit of the less astute readers who are not prepared to appreciate them.

The matter of the act of the Binding—Ibn Ezra already wrote in his commentary on the prophecy of Jonah what he wrote, and revealed his opinion regarding this as well as the matter of Jonah in the bowels of the whale.¹³⁴ According to this [opinion], everything said and done, and the ram that was prepared for him by being caught in the thicket by his horns—is of the type [of miracles] I called by the term *ot*.¹³⁵ Genesis Rabbah [65.1]: “*On the third day Abraham lifted his eyes*

132 See *Guide* 3.24.

133 *Ibid.*, 2.41. Yet Maimonides perhaps also subtly alludes to the view that the entire story of the Binding took place in a vision of prophecy; see below.

134 See Ibn Ezra's commentary to Jonah 1:1. Ibn Ezra maintains that all prophecies come to the prophets in visions and dreams, with the exception of Moses. He sees the whole story of Jonah's fleeing from God as occurring in a prophetic dream and juxtaposes this story with Abraham's ordeal of the Binding of Isaac.

135 That is to say, an event appears in a prophetic dream and not in reality.

[Genesis 22:4]—on the third day of Jonah, as it is stated: *Jonah was in the bowels of the fish for three days*” [Jonah 2:1]. They hinted in this manner that the same is true of both, and one should not be surprised by the designation of the [number of] days in them. . . .¹³⁶ To my way of thinking, the Sages also alluded in Genesis Rabbah to the interpretation of the sage [Ibn Ezra] by way of a profound hint and veiled secret. They said: “*And Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his ass* [Genesis 22:3]. Yet how many servants did he have!—Love spoils the order. Hate too spoils the order, as it is stated: *And Balaam arose early in the morning and saddled his ass* [Numbers 22:21]. Yet how many servants did he have!” etc. They also stated there [in Genesis Rabbah 55.8]: “The saddling that Abraham performed in order to go and do the will of the ‘One who said and the world was’ stands against the saddling that Balaam performed in order to curse Israel.”¹³⁷ See how they compared between these two matters, and you already know [the matter] of Balaam’s donkey.¹³⁸

Despite the fact that anyone who follows up on Nissim’s allusions can easily discern what his true view is, Nissim sees the danger of letting his discussion rest on this point, and so he adds for the benefit of the less astute reader:

In my opinion, there is no need for all this. Better and more correct in my view is to believe that this command, written by Moses our Master, was in fact from God to Abraham that he sacrifice his only son, just as we believe regarding all the other commands that God commanded Moses—the practical commandments and those involving opinions and beliefs—that they were commanded from the mouth of God, and not from the mouth of Moses and his intellect. Everything was from the mouth of God, and Moses wrote what

136 In other words, just as it is true that Jonah did not live for three days in the bowels of a fish but the event took place in a prophetic vision, the same is true of the story of Abraham. See also *Guide* 2.46, where Maimonides indicates that in visions of prophecy just as in ordinary dreams the prophet may see himself performing certain actions with intervals of time mentioned between them, as well as his going from one place to another. Maimonides’ examples are taken from Ezekiel, Isaiah, and the story of Abraham and the Covenant of the Pieces. Yet his description could just as easily fit the story of the Binding.

137 Nissim writes: “to curse the enemies of Israel” for apparently he did not want to write explicitly “to curse Israel.”

138 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 284-285. That is to say, that the whole story of Balaam’s journey and talking donkey took place in a vision of prophecy; see above.

was commanded from the mouth of God.¹³⁹ In general, everything that was given to us, said to us and reported to us is for our benefit, in order that the awe of God be instilled in us so we will not sin, and to circumcise the uncircumcised heart of our masses, and to separate Israel from all the nations in our being more special to God than any other nation. We will believe in this story as a necessary belief, just as we believe in creation on the basis of the story in Genesis. Therefore we do not have to seek an inner meaning, for this—that is to say, the literal meaning of the words—was the intent, to inform us in the Torah of a tale of a matter that will straighten all the masses in the love of God, just as the commands from the mouth of God also include the commandments of the intellect. I already commented upon them above.¹⁴⁰ Understand this and do not be astonished, and your confusion will vanish. For it is proper that all these stories and those similar to them be laid down in every religion, and expounded to the masses. These are the matters that are proper to instill in their hearts.¹⁴¹

For all the radical views found in Nissim's treatise, he does not advance them in order to undermine the Torah. Rather, it is because he regards the Torah as true and philosophy as true, and he sees in the latter the key to understanding the former, for the seal of God is Truth. Nissim goes much further than any of his predecessors to unveil the truth as he sees it out of his deep commitment to the Torah and his desire to illuminate the minds of his coreligionists with its real meaning. Yet in the spirit of Maimonides, he too understands that as a responsible public philosopher one must continue to remain sensitive also to the situation of the masses and frame one's presentation accordingly.

139 Compare to Maimonides' eighth principle of faith that he brings in his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*.

140 See *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 172.

141 *Ibid.*, 287.

Section III

The Reception of Maimonides in Medieval Provençal Jewish Philosophy





From Esotericism to Science: The Account of the Chariot in Maimonidean Philosophy Till the End of the Thirteenth Century

Introduction

In his *Commentary on the Guide of the Perplexed*, written at the turn of the fifteenth century, Don Isaac Abarbanel presents twenty-eight strictures to Maimonides' interpretation of the Account of the Chariot.¹

1 Abarbanel completed his commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed* after 1496 while living in Italy, but apparently wrote the strictures earlier, while still in Spain. Commenting on Abarbanel's view of Maimonides' interpretation of the Account of the Chariot, Eric Lawee notes: "If, as regards Maimonides' interpretation of the 'Account of the Beginning,' Abarbanel accepted the 'good' (most notably what he generally believed was Maimonides' literal interpretation of the opening verses of Genesis 1) and rejected the 'bad' (what he deemed Maimonides' partial annulment of the contextual sense of Genesis 2-3), things were otherwise in the case of Maimonides' interpretation of the 'Account of the Chariot': here Abarbanel found only degrees of bad"; See "The Good We Accept and the Bad We Do Not': Abarbanel's Stance towards Maimonides," in *Be'erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2005), 149. For a study of the philosophy of Abarbanel see Seymour Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003). For a study of Abarbanel's commentary on Maimonides' Account of the Chariot, see David Ben-Zazon, "The Commentary of Don Isaac Abarbanel to the *Guide of the Perplexed*" (PhD thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2009), 201-252 (Heb.).

The first one captures the essence of Maimonides' interpretation and the reason for Abarbanel's rejection of it:

If what Ezekiel apprehended was in accordance with the opinion of the Master [Maimonides] in the manner he elucidated, then Ezekiel's apprehension is similar to what is apprehended by the philosophers of the natural sciences or metaphysics. It is very strange that rational investigation should attain what is given by prophetic emanation. If this were the case, our Sages would not so emphatically command to conceal this subject. . . . Behold in the academies of the gentile nations they expound these matters in assemblies of tens of thousands, consisting of young and old, making no effort at concealment. Rabbi Samuel Ibn Tibbon already was aware of this stricture, and Rabbi Ḥasdai Crescas expanded upon it in his treatise, *The Light of the Lord*. Narboni, however, wrote that the Master's intent is to show that this is what is apprehended by those engaged in speculation. For this reason, Maimonides states in the introduction to the third part [of the *Guide*] that the reward of one who conceals the secrets of the Torah, which are lucid and clear to those engaged in speculation, is very great. . . . The Master's contention that they are "clear to those engaged in speculation" is his own fabrication, for the Sages made no such assertion.²

Abarbanel's stricture points to a remarkable development in medieval Jewish thought. The cream of Jewish esoteric wisdom, the Account of the Chariot, is identified by Maimonides and his disciples with Aristotelian philosophy—both metaphysics and the natural sciences, at least according to Abarbanel's description. How and why this identification came about and its implications for the study of the Bible and of rabbinic midrash—that is to say, for the study of Judaism—encompasses much of the history of Jewish philosophy. In this chapter, I would like to touch upon some of the salient points of this story, from its rabbinic origins to Jewish philosophy in Provence at the end of the thirteenth century.

Early Traditions of the Account of the Chariot

The first *mishnah* of the second chapter of Tractate Ḥagigah reads:

2 See *Sefer Moreh Nevukhim* [...] *'im Arba'ah Perushim* (Jerusalem: 1960), part 3, 71b. All translations in this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted.

The [subject of] forbidden relations may not be expounded in the presence of three, nor the Account of Creation in the presence of two, nor the [Account of the] Chariot in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands by his own intelligence.³

While the subject matter of the first category, forbidden relations, is evident, though the reason for the restriction less so,⁴ and that of the second, the Account of Creation, is also obvious, as is its esoteric nature, the subject matter of the third category, the Account of the Chariot, is in itself a mystery. Clearly a biblical text is involved, as the term “expound” (*dorshin*) indicates.⁵ The Babylonian Talmud elaborates upon some of the traditions associated with the Account of the Chariot, including an identification of the biblical text that stands at its core:

R. Joseph studied the Account of the Chariot. The elders of Pumbeditha studied the Account of Creation. They said to him: Master, teach us the Account of the Chariot. . . . They said to him: We have already studied therein as far as, *And He said to me: Son of man* [Ezekiel 2:1]. He [R. Joseph] replied: This is the very [text of] the Account of the Chariot. An objection was raised: How far does the [text of] the Account of the Chariot extend? Rabbi said: As far as the second *And I saw* [Ezekiel 1:27]. R. Isaac said: As far as *hashmal* [ibid.]⁶—As far as *I saw* may be taught; from there on only the

3 As translated by Israel Abrahams (with some modifications) in the *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Mo'ed* (London: Soncino Press, 1938), vol. 4 (Hagigah), 59.

4 The talmudic discussion following the *mishnah* does not bring any mystical tradition associated with this subject, nor do the early commentators.

5 The only biblical text that deals with chariots in a prophetic context is Zechariah 6, but it is hard to discern how this prophecy warrants the severe restrictions placed on its instruction. Interestingly, there is no explication of any verse from Zechariah in which a vision of chariots appears in the subsequent talmudic discussion. As we shall see, this chapter is included among the *merkavah* texts by some of the medieval Jewish philosophers.

6 Ezekiel 1:26-28 reads: [26] *And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness of a man upon it above.* [27] *And I saw something like the color of electrum [hashmal], like the appearance of fire round about enclosing it; from what appeared to be his loins upward; and from what appeared to his loins downward I saw what appeared to be fire, and there was a brightness round about him.* [28] *As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about, this was the appearance of the likeness of the Glory of the*

chapter headings may be transmitted. Some say: As far as *I saw* the chapter headings may be transmitted, thenceforward, if he is a sage able to speculate by himself, yes; if not, no [BT Ḥagigah 13a].⁷

According to this discussion, the Account of the Chariot is limited to the first chapter of Ezekiel, though the term “chariot” (*merkavah*) does not occur at all in this vision. The chapter itself culminates, beginning with verse 27, in the most esoteric part of the vision—a description of the appearance of the one who sits on the throne. While the Talmud does not explicitly explain the reason for the name *merkavah*, the appearance of heavenly creatures termed *ofannim* (wheels) in Ezekiel’s vision provides the most evident explanation. Some of the traditions brought by the Talmud, particularly those associated with R. Joḥanan ben Zakai and his disciples, point to the esoteric nature of this study, the supernatural phenomena that accompany its proper explication, and the heavenly reward thereby attained, that is, a place among the angels in the world to come. The dangers involved in this study are also presented.⁸

The talmudic treatment of the Account of the Chariot includes an explanation of a number of verses by way of esoteric etymologies:

What does *hashmal* mean? Rav Judah said: Living creatures speaking fire [an abbreviation of *אש ממליות*]. In a *baraita* it is taught: At times they are silent (*hash*), at times they speak (*mal*). When the utterance goes forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, they are silent, and when the utterance does not go forth from

Lord; and when I saw it, I fell upon my face and I heard the voice of one that spoke. According to the first opinion, only to the end of verse 26, in which the appearance of a man sitting on the throne is introduced, may be expounded. According to the second opinion, the meaning of the electrum may also be transmitted.

7 I. Abrahams (with modifications), 76-77.

8 For the dangers involved, see BT Ḥagigah 13a, 77: “For behold there was once a child [*yanuka*] who expounded the [mysteries of] *hashmal*, and a fire went forth and consumed him.” A number of scholarly studies are devoted to a detailed analysis of the talmudic discussion of the Account of the Chariot in Ḥagigah. See, for example, David J. Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980); Ira Chernus, *Mysticism in Rabbinic Judaism* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982).

the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, they speak [BT Ḥagigah 13a-b].⁹

Tales that are mythic in nature are also presented:

Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel (ofan) upon the earth by the living creatures [Ezekiel 1:15]. R. Eliezer said: It refers to a certain angel who stands on the earth and his head reaches unto the living creatures. A baraita teaches: His name is Sandalfon; he is higher than his fellows by a distance of five hundred years' journey, and he stands behind the Chariot and wreathes crowns for his Maker. But is it so? Behold it is written: Blessed be the Glory of the lord from His place [Ezekiel 3:12], accordingly, no one knows His place! He [Sandalfon] pronounces the Name over the crown and it goes and rests on His head [BT Ḥagigah 13b].¹⁰

From the various traditions brought by the Babylonian Talmud, it is clear that the Sages did not regard the first chapter of Ezekiel as the only text devoted to this subject. Isaiah's vision in chapter 6 is compared to Ezekiel's more detailed vision. Ezekiel 10:4 is explained in reference to Ezekiel's vision in chapter 1. Verses from other biblical books—in particular, Daniel 7:9-10—are expounded in the course of the discussion.¹¹

The Babylonian Talmud continues its discussion with the story of the four sages who entered into an orchard (*pardes*)—Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Elisha ben Avuya, and Rabbi Akiva—and brings various tales concerning the protagonists of this story. Rabbi Akiva, the only one who is said to have entered and departed unscathed by the experience, is reported as warning his fellow travelers: “When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not: Water water, for it is said: *He that speaks falsehood shall not be established before my eyes* [Psalms 101:7]” (BT Ḥagigah 14b). The context in which this story is brought suggests an integral connection with the tradition of the Account of the Chariot, though the story itself is of a different nature. There is no hint in the

⁹ I. Abrahams, 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78-79.

¹¹ BT Ḥagigah 13b-14a.

story that he is expounding a text. Rather the story suggests one of heavenly ascent and the dangers involved.¹²

Some of the traditions reported in the Babylonian Talmud concerning the Account of the Chariot appear also in the Tosefta and in the Jerusalem Talmud with a number of variations.¹³ From these various traditions, one can discern at least two major approaches to the nature of this subject. The dominant one is that the Account of the Chariot consists of an esoteric explication of a number of biblical texts, primarily from the beginning of Ezekiel, dealing with the various creatures constituting the heavenly world together with the one who sits on the throne—in all likelihood a figurative reference to God. The proper understanding of these texts brings about a revelatory experience as well as reward in the hereafter. The study itself, however, is fraught with physical dangers for the unprepared, and hence the severe limitations placed on those desiring to engage in it. The second approach, which is described by an entrance or ascent to an orchard (*pardes*), suggests a heavenly ascent, in which no text is the object of study. Rather the mystic is described as beholding different sights on his journey and warned not to misinterpret their true reality. In this approach, the dangers involved are emphasized. As we shall see below, the rabbinic approach in the geonic period, which developed in wake of the growing popularity of mystical literature, focused more on the second approach, despite other possible interpretations of the story of the entrance to an orchard—for example, as a parable for the esoteric

12 For another possibility to interpret the story, see below. For an analysis of this story, see the studies cited above, n. 8; see also Ephraim Urbach, “The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tanaitic Period,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom Scholem*, ed. Zvi Werblowsky, Ephraim Urbach, Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 1-28 (Heb.); Yehuda Liebes, *The Sin of Elisha: The Four Who Entered Pardes and the Nature of Talmudic Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Academ, 1990) (Heb.); Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “Four Entered Paradise Revisited,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995): 133-169. For a discussion that summarizes and critiques the various approaches, see Joseph Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism and Esotericism: Ancient Times*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mercas Zalman Shazar, 2008), 290-316 (Heb.).

13 Tosefta Ḥagigah 2:1-2; Jerusalem Talmud Ḥagigah 2:1, 8a-9b.

study of biblical texts—which perhaps are more in harmony with the views of the sages of the Talmud.

The subsequent midrashic compilations that were edited in the geonic period, and the mystical literature written at this time or toward the end of the talmudic period,¹⁴ combine and elaborate upon these approaches. In the *Heikhalot* (palace) literature, such as *Heikhalot Rabbati* and *Heikhalot Zutarti*, the *merkavah* (chariot) is conceived as a palace, and detailed descriptions are brought of the ascent through the seven palaces of the upper heaven, the dangers encountered by the mystic, the secret names and seals that are presented to the heavenly gatekeepers in order to continue one's ascent, and the awesome and terrifying sights of God and the angels that are beheld when reaching the throne room.¹⁵ These texts are presented as belonging to the tanaitic tradition. While some of the motifs found in these texts are derived from Ezekiel's vision, there is no attempt to link the heavenly ascent to the study of this biblical text.

Shi'ur Qomah, a small treatise existing in a number of different recensions and ascribed to R. Ishmael and R. Akiva, which achieved canonical status among many Jews in the geonic period, goes so far as to describe the measurements and secret names of the limbs of God, in

14 Some researchers ascribe an earlier date to these texts, or at least to the traditions on which they are based—namely, the tanaitic period, if not even earlier. For a survey of the various approaches to this issue, see Rachel Elijor, *The Three Temples* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2004), 242 n. 4. I have found no persuasive argument to date the composition of the texts before the end of the talmudic period, or even prior to the geonic period, and to treat them accordingly. One, of course, should not reject out of hand the possibility that these texts contain much older traditions, as some of the researchers took great pains to show, but in the absence of new evidence it does not appear to me that it is possible to prove this claim.

15 For an analysis of the texts comprising this tradition, see Ithamar Gruenwald, *Apocalyptic and Merkavah Mysticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 127-217. For a study of the relation of these texts to pre-talmudic and to mysticism in the time of the Talmud, see Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1960); David J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1988); Elijor, *The Three Temples*, 241-277; Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 2, 678-713.

all probability based on a mystical exegesis of *Song of Songs*.¹⁶ According to one of the recensions of this text:

R. Ishmael said to his disciples: I and R. Akiva pledge that one who knows this measurement of our Maker and the praise of God is guaranteed a place in the World to Come, so long as he recites this text every day.¹⁷

By presenting itself as the authoritative teaching of the most esoteric part of Ezekiel's vision—namely, of God, *Shi'ur Qomah* in a crucial sense attempts to usurp Ezekiel's text as well as other biblical texts, as the main object of study for those seeking to delve into the Account of the Chariot. The authors of this text, as well as of the *Heikhalot* texts, were clearly interested in popularizing their mystical-magical approach, and no longer severely limiting the study of the Account of the Chariot to the intellectual elite, which was done in accordance with the decree of Rabbi Judah the Prince in the Mishnah. They recorded their approach in texts, thereby making them more readily accessible to the Jewish community. They ascribed these texts to the leading rabbinic authorities of old, thereby conferring upon them binding authority,

16 *Shi'ur Qomah* takes its inspiration from the descriptions of the lover in Song of Songs, essentially viewing this book as a parable of the love between God and Israel. Song of Songs thus may be seen as the most esoteric of biblical texts. Perhaps this is the reason for the great esteem with which it was held by R. Akiva, who remarked: "All Scriptures are holy and Song of Songs is the holy of holies" (Mishnah Yadayim 3:8), even though no mystical traditions related to this text are recorded in Tractate Ḥagigah. On early rabbinic approaches to Song of Songs, see Saul Lieberman's appendix to Gershon Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 118-126. See also Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 3, 891-898. *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:27 brings the story of the four scholars who entered *pardes* in the explanation of the verse: *The king has brought me into his chambers* (Song of Songs 1:4), which also may help explain why the *merkavah* was transformed into the chambers of the highest heavenly palace.

17 See Peter Schäfer et al. (eds.), *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981), 261, par. 711. For a study of this treatise and a translation of one of the recensions, see Martin S. Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Liturgy and Theurgy in Pre-Kabbalistic Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983). See also Asi Farber-Ginat, "Studies in the Book *Shi'ur Komah*," in *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1994), 361-394 (Heb.); Dan, *History of Jewish Mysticism*, vol. 3, 887-913.

and they encouraged the study of these texts by emphasizing the rewards their mastery brings.¹⁸ There is much evidence that the mystics enjoyed considerable success in their endeavors. Many motifs from this mystical literature found their way into the liturgical poetry and many Jews were convinced that mystical texts such as *Heikhalot Rabbati* and *Shi'ur Qomah* in fact belong to the tanaïtic tradition.

One of the most important pieces of evidence indicative of the inroads made by this literature is to be found in a question addressed to R. Sherira Gaon, the head of the Academy of Pumbeditha in the second half of the tenth century, by the Jewish community of Fez. The community juxtaposes the severe limitations placed on the study of esoteric traditions in the second chapter of Tractate Ḥagigah, together with the warning in the Mishnah that “whoever does not consider the honor of His maker, it were a mercy if he had not come into the world,” with the promise made by R. Ishmael and R. Akiva in *Shi'ur Qomah* that everyone who understands this text and recites it every day attains the World to Come. They ask R. Sherira:

Did R. Ishmael state what he learned from his teacher, and his teacher from his teacher, as a law (*halakhab*) of Moses from Sinai, or did he state it as his own opinion? And if this was his own opinion, did we not learn in the Mishnah: “Whoever does not consider the honor of his Maker, it were a mercy if he had not come into the world”? May our Master thoroughly explain this matter to us.¹⁹

R. Sherira responds by indicating that Rabbi Ishmael was stating an authentic tradition, but this tradition should not be understood literally, as God has no limbs or measurements. A true understanding of these matters, which R. Sherira sees as belonging to the *merkavah* tradition, and is in fact the most esoteric part of this tradition, must remain confined to the elite few as the Mishnah mandates. He thus

18 The opening of *Heikhalot Rabbati* reads like a recruitment manual, spelling out the rewards and powers accruing in this world to the one who masters the subject and successfully completes the mystical journey.

19 See Simcha Emanuel (ed.), *Teshuvot ha-Geonim ha-Ḥadashot* (Jerusalem: Machon Ofek, 1995), 217.

excuses himself from delving into these secrets and offering a thorough explanation.²⁰

One can detect in R. Sherira's response an ambivalent attitude towards the text in question. On one hand, he does not challenge its authenticity. On the other hand, he seeks to neutralize the tradition it represents by indicating that it should not be understood literally and suggesting that the simple recitation of this tradition has no eschatological significance.

A fundamental question raised by R. Sherira's response is: how should *Shi'ur Qomah* be understood in his view? What were the alternative approaches to the Account of the Chariot traditions in the geonic period? It appears that the most important one is that of R. Saadiah Gaon. In a passage from a lost polemical work of his, preserved by R. Judah ben Barzilai al-Barceloni in his commentary on the *Book of Creation*, R. Saadiah goes so far as to challenge the authenticity of *Shi'ur Qomah*. Even if it is an authentic tanaïtic text, he continues, it clearly is not meant to be a description of God but of a special created light, known also as God's Glory (*kavod*).²¹

A description of the Glory is brought by R. Saadiah in *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 2.10. After interpreting the corporeal descriptions of God in the Bible in a figurative manner, R. Saadiah turns to the problem of understanding the nature of the image of God sitting on the throne, as reported in a number of biblical passages, including Ezekiel 1:26. He writes:

The form was something created. Similarly, the throne and the firmament, as well as its bearers, were all of them produced for the first time by the Creator out of fire. . . . It is a form nobler even than that of the angels, magnificent in character, resplendent with light, which is called the Glory of the Lord. It is this form too that one of the prophets described as follows: *I beheld till thrones were placed and one that was ancient of days did sit* [Daniel 7:9], and the Sages

20 Ibid., 217-218.

21 Judah al-Barceloni, *Perush Sefer Yetsirah*, ed. S. J. Halberstam (Berlin: Mekize Nirdamim, 1885), 20-22.

characterized as *shekbinah*. Sometimes, however, this specially created being consists of light without the form of a person.²²

R. Saadiah's approach provided a theological alternative to the mystical-anthropomorphic approach of the *Heikhalot* tradition. The image sitting on the throne is of a visible creature, the noblest one created by God, who can take on different shapes or no shape at all, appearing solely as a special light, in accordance with the divine decree.²³ R. Sherira may have had R. Saadiah's view in mind when he indicates that *Shi'ur Qomah* should not be understood literally. Unlike R. Saadiah, he does not go so far as to question the authenticity of this work.

It is not clear from R. Saadiah's account, however, what are the secrets involved in the study of the Account of the Chariot. R. Saadiah points to the danger in beholding the face of the Created Glory—it can lead to the physical decomposition of the person²⁴—but not in studying traditions regarding this creature or the different heavenly creatures mentioned in Ezekiel. Nor does his theology suggest that the study of the heavenly world will lead to witnessing this sight. The Created Glory is revealed to the one chosen by God to be a prophet in order to confirm the prophetic mission.²⁵ Aside from reading the first chapter of Ezekiel in a literal manner while substituting the Glory of God, rather than God, as the subject of the end of the chapter, R. Saadiah has left us with no deeper understanding of Ezekiel's description.

No less important than R. Sherira Gaon's response for showing the inroads made by the *Heikhalot* literature in its acceptance by the Jewish

22 Saadiah Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), 121. For an analysis of R. Saadiah's conception of the Created Glory, see Alexander Altmann, "Saadya's Theory of Revelation: Its Origin and Background," in *Saadya Studies*, ed. E. I. J. Rosenthal (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1943), 4-25. See also Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 59-91.

23 It should be noted that R. Saadiah also accepts the existence of angels as ethereal creatures who serve the incorporeal deity and make their way from heaven to earth.

24 *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 2.12: 130. See Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 131.

25 *Ibid.*, 2.10; 3.5.

public by the end of the tenth century and beginning of the eleventh, is the response of his son R. Hai Gaon to questions addressed to him regarding the interpretation of the story of the four sages who entered *pardes*:

Know that it has never been our way to conceal anything or to interpret it not in accordance with the thought of its author, as others do. We will interpret for you the view of this *tana* [sage of the Mishnah], the matter as he intended and the truth as he held it, without guaranteeing at present that [acceptance] of these matters is legally binding (*halakbah*). . . . Perhaps you are aware that many of the sages were of the opinion that one who is upright . . . when he wishes to gaze upon the *merkavah* and glance at the palaces of the angels on high, there are several ways to accomplish this: He should fast on certain known days and place his head between his knees and whisper to the ground many songs and praises, which have been disclosed. Then he glimpses its [*merkavah*'s] innermost parts and chambers as one who sees with his eyes seven palaces and gazes at them as though he goes from palace to palace and sees what is in each one. There are two books of Mishnah that the *tanas* taught regarding this matter, and they are called *Heikhalot Rabbati* and *Heikhalot Zutarti*. This matter is well known. Regarding gazing [upon the *merkavah*], this *tana* taught: "Four entered *pardes*." He likened these palaces to an orchard and pictured these four [sages], in accordance with his opinion, as gazing at the *merkavah* and viewing the entrance to the palaces as one who enters an orchard. This interpretation is clear from the context [of the story]. First, the passage of the *mishnah* upon which this teaching is brought is: ". . . Nor [is taught] the [Account of the] Chariot in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands by his own intelligence." Furthermore, it is stated in the *baraita* explicitly: "R. Akiva said: When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not: Water water." In *Heikhalot Zutarti*, this is explained as follows: "The entrance to the sixth palace appears as though it contains thousands of myriads of waves of water, yet it contains not a single drop. Rather it contains luminous air and transparent stones of pure marble, like a palace whose luminous appearance is similar to water."²⁶ . . . R. Akiva was more perfect than the others, for he glanced as required and gazed properly and his mind was able to contain these frightening sights, so God granted him life. Everything upon which he gazed he grasped properly with the correct

26 For a slightly different variant of the text, see Rachel Elior (ed.), *Heikhalot Zutarti* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 30.

understanding. Know that this interpretation was accepted by all the earliest [sages] and none of them denied it, since they said that God performs signs and wonders by means of the righteous just as He does by means of the prophets, and He shows the righteous wondrous sights as He does for the prophets. . . . The master R. Samuel Gaon and others like him, who frequently consulted the books of the gentiles, maintain that these sights were seen only by the prophets, and no miracle is performed except for a prophet. They deny all tales in which it is claimed that a miracle was performed for the righteous and say that this is not a legally binding opinion. Even the tale regarding R. Akiva gazing upon the palaces, and what is told about R. Neḥunia ben Haqana and R. Ishmael and others like them²⁷—they say that belief in all these stories is not legally binding. We, however, are of the opinion that God performs miracles and great wonders for the righteous, and it is not farfetched that He shows them inwardly the sights of His palaces and the status of His angels.²⁸

R. Hai neither casts any doubt on the view that the talmudic story of the four who entered *pardes* is an allegory for gazing at the *merkavah*, nor does he question the authenticity of the *Heikhalot* literature as tanaïtic compositions describing the *merkavah* and the preparations an individual must undergo in order to be able to gaze at it. From his response, one can detect to what extent the *Heikhalot* literature was considered the primary one for understanding the Account of the Chariot in his time. Though he expresses some doubt as to whether one must accept these views as absolute truth, he himself is clearly convinced of their veracity.

As for the position of his father-in-law, R. Samuel ben Hofni Gaon,²⁹ head of the academy at Sura, who appears to reject the authenticity of

27 The reference here is to the stories found in *Heikhalot Rabbati* of the ascents of R. Neḥunia ben Haqana and R. Ishmael and the wondrous and terrifying sights beheld by each of them.

28 Compare to R. Nathan ben Yeḥiel, *Sefer Arukh ba-Shalem*, ed. Alexander Kohut, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1878), 14 (entry: *avnei shayish* [stones of marble]): “. . . *baraittha*, not that they ascend to on high, but they see and gaze in the chambers of their hearts like a person who sees and gazes on something distinct with his eyes, and they hear and speak with an eye that sees by the holy spirit. This is the interpretation of R. Hai Gaon.”

29 On the thought of R. Samuel, see David Sklare, *Samuel ben Hofni Gaon and his Cultural World* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

this literature by questioning whether the righteous are granted the experiences described in it, R. Hai criticizes him for being influenced by gentile literature—an allusion to the Moslem theologians, the *mutakallimūn*, who were of the opinion that God performs miracles only in order to verify the mission of the prophets.³⁰ R. Samuel follows here in the footsteps of his predecessor, R. Saadiah, who presented this view in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*,³¹ and, as we have already seen, questioned the authenticity of *Shi'ur Qomah*. From R. Hai's response, one gains the impression that the skeptics were in the minority, and that their views on this issue were to be rejected, since they were influenced by non-Jewish sources. We may conclude from what we have seen till now that the *Heikhalot* literature, *Shi'ur Qomah*, and the *Book of Creation* attained and maintained their lofty status among the Jews of the geonic period.³²

Both the *Heikhalot* tradition and R. Saadiah's approach were known to the Jewish thinkers of Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but neither of these approaches dominated their thinking. Many adopted Neoplatonic philosophy in understanding the order of existence, conjunction with the higher world being the goal of this study. The stage was set to interpret the Account of the Chariot in terms of the Greek philosophic tradition, which reached them by way of Arabic translations of the Greek texts and compositions by Moslem thinkers influenced by this tradition. Yet in the dominant Jewish philosophic treatises of this period—for example, Solomon Ibn Gabirol's *Fountain of Life* and Joseph Ibn Zaddik's *The Book of the Microcosm*—there is no attempt to explain Ezekiel's vision. The wedding between Neoplatonic philosophy and the Account of the Chariot can be detected in Ibn Gabirol's poetry, particularly his majestic poem *The Royal Crown*.

30 See Michael Schwarz's remark in his Hebrew translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (Tel-Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Press, 2002), 214 n. 62.

31 See *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 3.4.

32 This literature also left its impression on Rashi. See, for example, his commentary on BT Ḥagigah 14b. For a discussion of the influence of the *Heikhalot* literature on Rashi, see Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Peering through the Lattices: Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 149-151.

At the heart of this poem is a description of the nine principle celestial spheres, in keeping with Ptolemaic astronomy. Above these spheres is the “Sphere of Intelligence”:

Who shall descend as deep as Thy thoughts?
 For from the splendor of the sphere of Intelligence Thou hast
 wrought the radiance of souls
 And the high angels that are the messengers of Thy will,
 The ministers of Thy presence,
 Majestic of power and great in the Kingdom of heaven,
 “In their hand the flaming sword that turneth every way”
 . . .
 From a holy place are they come,
 And from the fount of light are they drawn.
 They are divided into companies,
 And on their banner are signs graven of the pen of the swift scribe.
 There are superior and attendant bands,
 And hosts running and returning,
 But never weary and never faint,
 Seeing but invisible.
 And there are some wrought of flame,
 And some are wafted air,
 And some compounded of fire and water,
 And there are Serafim in burning rows,
 And winged lightnings and darting arrows of fire,
 And each troop of them all bows itself down
 “To Him who rideth the highest heavens.”³³

Ibn Gabirol uses many motifs borrowed from Ezekiel’s vision in describing the world of the supernal Intellect. In the next stanza he deals with the final level, the Throne of Glory:

33 Israel Davidson (ed.), *Selected Religious Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, trans. Israel Zangwill (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1923), 100-101.

For beyond the sphere of Intelligence hast Thou established the
 Throne of Thy glory;
 There standeth the splendor of Thy veiled habitation,
 And the mystery and the foundation.
 Thus far reacheth Intelligence, but cometh here to a standstill,
 For higher still hast Thou mounted, and ascended Thy mighty
 throne,
 “And no man may go up with Thee.”³⁴

One may interpret the images in Ibn Gabirol’s poem in light of his philosophical discourse in the *Fountain of Life*, in which he describes the supernal simple beings—Universal Soul and the Universal—that are found above the material world and serve as the source of the individual forms. These beings are alluded to in the poem in the description of the “Sphere of Intelligence.” The Throne of Glory signifies the levels above them—Universal Form and Universal Matter. At the pinnacle of the hierarchy of being are found the divine Will and the First Being, an apparent reference to God, the apprehension of which is beyond human ability.³⁵ Even if one accepts this interpretation, it does not provide us with a detailed understanding of the components of Ezekiel’s vision in Ibn Gabirol’s thought.

A more explicit understanding of the Account of the Chariot may be found in Judah Halevi’s philosophic treatise, the *Kuzari*. He adopts an ambiguous stance in his understanding of the celestial realm, which leads him to present three different approaches to the Account of the Chariot. The first approach follows in the footsteps of R. Saadiyah, who views the Created Glory as the most sublime of God’s creations,

³⁴ Ibid., 102.

³⁵ For a study of Ibn Gabirol’s philosophy, see Jacques Schlanger, *La philosophie de Salomon Ibn Gabirol* (Leiden: Brill, 1968). See also Sarah Pessin, *Ibn Gabirol’s Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). Harry A. Wolfson interprets the Throne of Glory as a figurative representation of Universal Matter. In support of his interpretation he refers to *Fountain of Life* 5.42, where Universal Matter is described as a *cathedra* for the One, and upon which sits the Will. See Harry A. Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalām in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 118.

and which is represented by the man who is sitting on the throne at the beginning of Ezekiel. The second approach appears to be based on the notion of the *pleroma* found among the mystics. Halevi writes (*Kuzari* 4.3):

Concerning the visions seen by Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, there is some doubt whether their objects were newly created, or of the number of these lasting spiritual beings. “Glory of God” is that subtle substance which follows the will of God, assuming any form God wishes to show to the prophet. This is one view. According to another view, the Glory of God means the whole of the angels and spiritual beings, as well as the throne, chariot, firmament, wheels, spheres, and other imperishable beings. All this is styled “Glory,” just as a king’s retinue is called his splendor.

According to both these interpretations of the Glory, the beings beheld by the prophets were made visible to the prophets’ eyesight. Halevi adds: “The higher degrees of these beings are so transcendent that even the prophets cannot perceive them, and if he attempts to perceive them his body will decompose” (*ibid.*), a description taken from R. Saadiah’s discussion of the consequences of seeing the face of the Glory.³⁶ Halevi understands the Jewish mystical traditions in light of the idea of the Created Glory that the prophets merit seeing, mentioning explicitly the Account of the Chariot and *Shi’ur Qomah* in this context.³⁷

Halevi considers a third possibility, namely that “some angels . . . are lasting, and are perhaps those spiritual beings of which the philosophers speak” (*ibid.*)—a clear reference to the Separate Intellects that are dressed in corporeal forms by the prophet’s imagination.³⁸

36 See above, note 24. Both authors use the same Arabic expression to indicate the decomposition of the body.

37 See *Kuzari* 4.3. For an analysis of the extensive use by Halevi of motifs taken from older Jewish mystical traditions, see Elliot Wolfson, “Merkavah Traditions in Philosophical Garb: Judah Halevi Reconsidered,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 57 (1990-91): 179-242.

38 For a discussion of this issue, see Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 125-136; see, however, Warren Z. Harvey, “Judah Halevi’s Synesthetic Theory of Prophecy and a Note on the *Zohar*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 12 (1996): 141-155 (Heb.). In *Kuzari* 3.65 Halevi mentions the

The understanding of the Account of the Chariot in terms of the Neoplatonic philosophic tradition emerges clearly from a number of Ibn Ezra's works.³⁹ As in the case of his predecessors, he does not present a detailed explication of this subject, at least not in his extant works. In his commentary to Isaiah 6, he indicates that he will explain the components of this vision in his commentary to Ezekiel, but no such commentary has survived and it is questionable whether Ibn Ezra completed one. In several passages in his commentaries, most notably in his long commentary to Exodus 3:15 and in his commentary to Daniel 10:21, Ibn Ezra equates the angels with those beings who exist as forms without bodies, a reference to the supernal intellects, and with the heavenly spheres.⁴⁰ In *Yesod Mora*, Ibn Ezra indicates that Ezekiel's vision of God as a man sitting on a throne should not be interpreted literally.⁴¹ In a later passage in the treatise, he describes the content and significance of the highest knowledge attainable by the human being:

God alone created all, and knows all the parts in a general way [ה' לבדו בורא הכל ויודע חלקי הכל בדרך כלל], for all the parts change. Only the human soul bestowed by God is like a tablet prepared to be written upon. And when the writing of God is written on this tablet—that is, knowledge of the principles of what is generated from the four roots [earth, water, air, and fire], and knowledge of the spheres, the Throne of Glory, and the secret of the *merkavah* and knowledge of the Supernal [or: and the Supernal Intellect, דעת עליון]—then the soul

Account of the Chariot, and he also agrees with the view that the *Heikhalot* literature was written by the Sages of the Mishnah.

- 39 I do not mean to suggest that Ibn Ezra's esoteric theological views are derived in their entirety from Neoplatonic philosophy, whether that of Ibn Gabirol or Avicenna, and all his vague references should be understood in terms of this philosophy. Clearly other sources also underlie his theological views, as evidenced by his discussion of the divine names in his long commentary to Exodus 3:15 and the mathematical significance of the letters composing the Tetragrammaton that he presents there.
- 40 Both sources present three levels of existents, but they divide the levels differently. See also his long commentary to Exodus 33:21. For a discussion of these sources see Howard Kreisel, "The Term *Kol* in Abraham Ibn Ezra: A Reappraisal," *Revue des études juives* 153 (1994): 39-48.
- 41 Abraham Ibn Ezra, *Yesod Mora ve-Sod Torah*, ed. Joseph Cohen (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), chap. 1, 84.

conjoins with the glorious Name while it still dwells in the person, and so [it remains] when it separates from the body.⁴²

In this passage, Ibn Ezra mentions in passing the main subjects belonging to the natural and divine sciences without entering into detail. The study of the chariot follows the study of the spheres and the Throne of Glory, suggesting that it refers to the incorporeal world. The mastery of these sciences leads to conjunction and immortality. As in the case of Ibn Gabirol, Ibn Ezra gives a poetic expression to this approach. In his Hebrew adaptation of Avicenna's *Ḥayy Ibn Yaqzān*, Ibn Ezra describes the nine spheres, followed by the supernal world of the various groups of angels beyond the spheres, and culminating with God.⁴³ While Ibn Ezra does not explain these classes, they probably should be understood in terms of the Aristotelian view Avicenna adopted of the Separate Intellects, who are the Movers of the spheres. Ibn Ezra does not attempt to list ten classes of angels, corresponding to the ten Separate Intellects (nine Movers of the spheres and the Active Intellect) in Islamic Aristotelian philosophy, but among those he mentions are *keruwim*, *serafim*, and *ofannim*—groups of angels found in the account

42 Ibid., chap. 10, 168-169. The term דעה עליין occurs a number of times in Ibn Ezra's writings, but it does not appear that it is used in a consistent manner. In his commentary to Genesis 6:2, Exodus 25:6, and Psalms 89:7, the term appears to refer to astrological/astronomical knowledge. In other passages, such as the short commentary to Exodus 33:12 and the commentary to Psalms 94:10, it refers to the Supernal Intellect. In the alternate (long) commentary to Genesis 3:21, it is used in an ambiguous manner. On the question of whether the Supernal Intellect is a reference to the Deity or to a hypostasis beneath the Deity, see Kreisel, "The Term *Kol* in Abraham Ibn Ezra," 51; see, however, Elliot Wolfson, "God, the Demiurge and the Intellect: On the Usage of the Word *Kol* in Abraham Ibn Ezra," *Revue des études juives* 149 (1990): 105.

43 See Israel Levin (ed.), *Abraham Ibn Ezra Reader* (New York and Tel-Aviv: Israel Matz Hebrew Classics, 1985), 73-87 (Heb.). Levin brings also a Hebrew translation of Avicenna's poem on pages 91-99. For a study of Avicenna's poem, see Henry Corbin, *Avicenne et le récit visionnaire* (Tehran: Département d'Iranologie de l'Institut Franco-Iranien, 1954). For a comparison between the two poems, see Aaron Hughes, "A Case of Twelfth-Century Plagiarism? Abraham Ibn Ezra's 'Ḥay ben Meqitz' and Avicenna's 'Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān,'" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 55 (2004): 306-331.

of Ezekiel or Isaiah.⁴⁴ It should be added that Ibn Ezra mentions *Shi'ur Qomah* in his long commentary to Exodus 33:21 and *Yesod Mora*. Like R. Sherira Gaon and Judah Halevi before him, he accepts the authenticity of this text but indicates that it should be interpreted in an allegorical manner.⁴⁵

The most explicit attempt to understand the Account of the Chariot in terms of Aristotelian philosophy prior to Maimonides can be found in Abraham Ibn Daud's *Emunah Ramah*.⁴⁶ Ibn Daud presents the view that the stars are intelligent beings far superior to human beings. In showing how Scripture supports this view, he writes the following:

One who studies the beginning of Ezekiel on the Account of the Chariot and looks at what he says about the four living creatures: *They had the likeness of a man* [Ezekiel 1:5], and his further saying: *As for the likeness of their faces, they had the face of a man and they four had the face of a lion on the right side and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle* [Ezekiel 1:10] . . . and his saying: *When those moved they moved; and when those stood still these stood still; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up along with them, for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels* [Ezekiel 1:21]—one who looks at all these things will apprehend subtleties that we shall not explain insofar as our ancestors prevented us from so doing in their saying: “Whoever does not consider the honor of his Maker, it is proper that should not come into the world” (Mishnah Ḥagigah 2:1).⁴⁷

While Ibn Daud pointedly refrains from entering into any of the details of Ezekiel's vision, it is clear from his treatise that it should be understood in terms of the nature of the heavenly existents and their influence on the earthly elements—a topic he describes in detail in light of

44 *Abraham Ibn Ezra Reader*, 82-83.

45 *Yesod Mora*, chap. 1, 84; chap. 12, 201. See Alexander Altmann, “Moses Narboni's ‘Epistle on Shi'ur Qoma,’” in *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (London: Routledge, 1969), 180-209.

46 For a study of Ibn Daud's philosophy see T. A. M. Fontaine, *In Defence of Judaism: Abraham Ibn Daud* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1990).

47 Abraham Ibn Daud, *Emunah Ramah*, ed. Samuel Weil (Frankfurt A.M.: n.p., 1852), 1, 8:43.

Avicenna's Neoplatonized version of Aristotle's philosophy.⁴⁸ As opposed to Ibn Ezra, who links the Account of the Chariot to the study of the world of incorporeal existents, Ibn Daud apparently understands Ezekiel's vision as focusing upon, or at least including, the heavenly spheres. *Emunah Ramah*, however, made little impact on the generations immediately following its appearance, as it was quickly eclipsed by Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.

Maimonides on the Account of the Chariot

It was left to Maimonides to develop the connection between the Account of the Chariot and the Greek philosophic tradition. Given the legal stature of the author, his treatment carried much weight by his contemporaries and continued to exert a profound influence on subsequent Jewish thought. In his commentary on Mishnah Ḥagigah 2.1, Maimonides explains:

They [the Sages] understand by the Account of Creation natural science and an in-depth exploration of the principles of existence. By the Account of the Chariot, they understand divine science [or: the science of God, theology], which is an examination of existence in its entirety; the existence of the Creator and His knowledge and attributes and that all existents are necessarily derived from Him; the angels; the soul and intellect of man; and what transpires after death. Because of the stature of these two sciences—the natural and the divine—and their superiority, they were forbidden to be taught in the same manner as the propaedeutic [or mathematical] sciences.⁴⁹

Maimonides attempts to tread a fine line between maintaining the esoteric nature of these subjects and at the same time giving an explicit indication of their content and clear allusions to the philosophic literature that elucidates these matters. The terms “natural” and “divine” science underscore Maimonides' approach. Certainly anyone with knowledge of the medieval Aristotelian tradition would appreciate his allusions.

48 Ibn Daud deals with the heavenly spheres and their influences on the four elements in *Emunah Ramah* 1, 6:32; 2, 4, 2:59.

49 See Joseph Kafih (ed. and Hebrew trans.), *Mishnah 'im Perush ha-Rambam: Seder Mo'ed* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1963), 251.

It is tempting to posit that one of the factors influencing Maimonides' decision is the desire to halt the influence of Jewish mystical approaches found in the *Heikhalot* literature, *Shi'ur Qomah*, and the *Book of Creation*, which he regarded as completely false and which hindered his co-religionists from appreciating the philosophic truths underlying Judaism.⁵⁰ By and large he ignores these traditions, or one may say, treats them with silent disdain, except for two notable passages in which he mentions *Shi'ur Qomah* explicitly. The first is in his elaboration of the seventh principle of Judaism, dealing with the unique status of the prophecy of Moses, presented in the introduction to *Pereq Heleq* in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*. Maimonides indicates that this work should be interpreted in the same manner as the prophetic visions of God—a clear indication that they are the product of the Sages' imaginations and should be interpreted allegorically.⁵¹ Only in a later epistle does Maimonides, going much further than even R. Saadiah, reject this anthropomorphic work out of hand, treating it as the work of “one of the Greek homilists” (i.e., a non-philosophical pagan work) that should be completely eradicated. Moreover, he denies having ever considered this composition one of the works of the Sages.⁵² For Maimonides there is only one true key to understanding the secrets embedded in the Bible and the Talmud regarding the esoteric sciences, and that key is to be found in the Aristotelian philosophic tradition.⁵³

50 See Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006), 1-32.

51 See Isaac Shailat (ed. and Heb. trans), *Haqdamot HaRambam la-Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1992), 143.

52 See Yehoshua Blau (ed.), *Teshuvot ha-Rambam* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1989), 200-201. For a study of this issue, see Raphael Jospe, “Maimonides and *Shi'ur Qomah*,” in *Minḥat le-Sarah: Meḥqarim be-Filosofiyah Yehudit ve-Qabalah*, ed. Devora Dimant, Moshe Idel, and Shlomo Rosenberg (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), 195-209 (Heb.). It should be noted that Maimonides subsequently erased from his *Commentary on the Mishnah* the reference to *Shi'ur Qomah*; See Shailat, *Haqdamot HaRambam la-Mishnah*, 143 n. 27.

53 Maimonides alludes to this view in his discussion of the sixth principle of Judaism; See Shailat, *Haqdamot HaRambam la-Mishnah*, 142. In the *Guide*, he is much more explicit on this matter: see, for example, *Guide* 1.68; 2.2. The great esteem with which Maimonides held Aristotle and his disciples—which can be discerned in all his compositions even regarding those issues on which he apparently disagreed with them—testifies to the fact that he did not equate the “Greek homilists” with

Maimonides' acceptance of the Aristotelian tradition and his desire to identify this tradition with the Account of Creation and Account of the Chariot receives its most explicit expression in the first four chapters of the first book of the *Mishneh Torah, Book of Knowledge*, in the Laws of Principles of the Torah. In the first two chapters, Maimonides deals with the Account of the Chariot, the subject of these chapters being God and the "Separate Forms" that exist independent of body—a clear allusion to the Separate Intellects. He lists ten classes of angels,⁵⁴ corresponding to the most widely accepted number of such Separate Intellects in Aristotelian thought, particularly among Alfarabi and his followers.⁵⁵ The two highest classes listed by Maimonides are the *ḥayyot* and *ofanim* appearing in Ezekiel's vision, which refer to the Mover of the outermost sphere and to the Mover of the sphere of fixed stars respectively. Maimonides thus appears to give a clearer expression to the view Ibn Ezra alludes to that the Account of the Chariot is concerned with the world of incorporeal being. Maimonides outlines the Account of Creation in the next two chapters, and the subject of this science is the material existents—the celestial spheres and the sublunar existents. Maimonides ends his outline of this subject by mentioning the form of human intellect that attains immortality—"the intellect that is the form of the soul"—a clear allusion to the "acquired intellect" as depicted by Alfarabi.⁵⁶ He concludes his entire presentation by presenting a novel

the Aristotelian philosophers, but rather with those whose were inspired by Greek mythology. It is important to note that this tradition as it developed in the Arabic world is permeated by many Neoplatonic ideas, giving it a more mystical bent—particularly the idea of conjunction of the human intellect with the supernal intellect and the illumination of the intellect experienced in this state. Maimonides' rejection of the earlier Jewish mystical tradition does not reflect a rejection of mysticism *per se*, which was very much part of the philosophic tradition in his period. See Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides' Attitude toward Jewish Mysticism," in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), 200-219.

54 *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 2.7.

55 See Richard Walzer (ed. and trans.), *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 101-105.

56 *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 4.8. This intellect, according to Alfarabi, is no longer dependent upon the body for its existence. It is acquired from the Active Intellect when a person completes his studies, grasps the essence of the incorporeal existent—namely, of the Active Intellect—and consequently

interpretation of *pardes* as it appears in the story of the four sages in Tractate Ḥagigah. It does not refer to a heavenly ascent, but to the investigation of the natural and divine sciences. Only one who is intellectually capable and fully prepared by completing all the necessary preliminary studies can emerge intellectually and spiritually unscathed from an exploration of these sciences.⁵⁷ Yet only with the mastery of these sciences does one completely fulfill the highest of religious obligations, the love and fear of God.⁵⁸

The course is now set. Any follower of Maimonides pursuing the path he laid down would understand that the mastery of the Aristotelian sciences is far from an act of heresy, as many prior to and after Maimonides would have it. Rather, this activity is a legal obligation and the road to human perfection—a view that would soon give impetus to the translation of Aristotle and his commentators, particularly Averroes, into Hebrew in the non-Arabic-speaking Jewish world of Western Europe, the translation of other philosophic and scientific treatises, the writing of supercommentaries and encyclopedias of philosophy and science,⁵⁹ and the writing of commentaries on the Bible and the Midrash that are based on philosophical literature in the spirit of Maimonides' approach.

conjoins with the Active Intellect. For a discussion of this intellect, see Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 48-70. Maimonides' description of the perfect human intellect is in harmony with this view, as he writes there: "And the additional intellect which is found in the soul of a person is the form of the person of perfect intellect. Regarding this form, the Torah says: *Let us make a man in our image and likeness* [Genesis 1:26], that is to say, that he will possess a form that knows and grasps the intellects that have no body, like the angels that are form without body, till he resembles them." Compare this to Maimonides' description of the prophet in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 7.1; see also Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 137-139.

57 Maimonides, however, makes no allusion to physical dangers. Compare *Guide* 1.32.

58 For a discussion of the love and fear of God in Maimonides, see *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 225-266.

59 See Gad Freudenthal, "Les sciences dans les communautés juives médiévales de Provence: Leur appropriation, leur rôle," *Revue des études juives* 152 (1993): 29-136. Many of these encyclopedias have been studied in Steve Harvey (ed.), *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

Though one may infer from Maimonides' pronouncements in his various writings which sciences one must learn in order to attain intellectual perfection, less clear is the scope of the divine science, or the Account of the Chariot, in his thought. Is this science completely identical with Aristotelian metaphysics or is there a difference between the topics with which Aristotle deals in his *Metaphysics* and those which Maimonides regards as belonging to the divine science? Moreover, do the prophetic parables belonging to the Account of the Chariot, after they are properly deciphered, agree completely with the views of the Aristotelian philosophers according to Maimonides, or are there significant points of disagreement between them? To these questions there are no unequivocal answers, as we shall see—a point that would prove critical for the subsequent interpretation of Maimonides' thought.

Aristotle offers three essential definitions of metaphysics: 1) the study of that which is eternal and incorporeal; 2) the study of being *qua* being (or substance *qua* substance); 3) the study of the principles underlying the individual branches of the sciences, such as mathematics and physics.⁶⁰ Aristotle's definition, it should be noted, carries within it the

60 The contents of metaphysics in medieval Jewish philosophic thought, together with the Greek and Islamic background, have been explored by Harry Wolfson, "The Classification of Sciences in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *Hebrew Union College Jubilee Volume* (1925): 263-315. Alexander Altmann expanded upon, as well as corrected, some of Wolfson's observations regarding Maimonides and his predecessors in his article, "Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics," in *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 77-84. Altmann's article essentially aims at rebutting Pines' view on the limitations of knowledge in Maimonides' thought; see Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1979), 82-109. Altmann was followed by Herbert Davidson, who went about trying to achieve this objective in a much more direct manner in his article "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge," *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992-93): 49-103. See also Gad Freudenthal, "Maimonides on the Scope of Metaphysics *alias* Ma'aseh Merkavah: the Evolution of his Views," in *Maimónides y su época*, ed. Carlos del Valle, Santiago Garcia-Jalon and Juan Pedro Monferrer (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2007), 221-230. An expanded Hebrew version of this article, "Four Observations on Maimonides' Four Celestial Globes (Guide 2:9-10)," appears in *Maimonides: Conservatism, Originality and Revolution*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Shazar Center, 2009), vol. 2, 499-527. For a treatment of the issue of the scope of metaphysics in Avicenna's

seeds of blurring the distinctions between many of the sciences. Aristotle himself brings extracts from *Physics* and from other treatises in the course of his discussion in *Metaphysics*. The reason for this fact is not hard to discern. While metaphysics is concerned primarily with incorporeal existents, corporeal existents also enter into the picture, since they constitute part of the study of substance *per se*, in addition to the fact that a study of the principles underlying their existence and motion is, for Aristotle, a metaphysical topic. Moreover, insofar as Aristotle's proof of God, as well as the other incorporeal Movers, is based on the motion of the spheres, the study of the spheres is integrally related to metaphysics. Aristotle himself notes in *Metaphysics*:

That the Movers are substances, then, and that one of these is first and another second according to the same order as the movements of the stars, is evident. But in the number of the movements we reach a problem which must be treated from the standpoint of that one of the mathematical sciences which is most akin to philosophy—viz. of astronomy; for this science speculates about substance that is perceptible but eternal⁶¹

According to Aristotle, there are subjects that are common to metaphysics and the other sciences and in essence belong to more than one area. As we shall see below, the problem of where to draw the line between metaphysics and the other sciences becomes all the more evident in the medieval treatments of this subject, particularly that of Maimonides.

While not all medieval thinkers equated divine science with Aristotle's *Metaphysics* or with the topics included in this work, Aristotle's approach played a dominant role in defining divine science or theology in medieval philosophy. In his *Enumeration on the Sciences*, Alfarabi adopts Aristotle's view and expands upon it.⁶² He divides the natural sciences into eight parts, beginning with the principles common

thought and its philosophic antecedents, see Dmitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 237-267.

61 *Metaphysics* 12.8, 1073b, 1.1-5 (translated by W.D. Ross).

62 The Hebrew translation by Kalonymos ben Kalonymos was edited by Mauro Zonta, *La "Classificazione delle Scienze" di Al-Farabi nella Tradizione Ebraica* (Torino: Silvio Zamorani Editore, 1992), 23-30.

to all natural substances, moving on to an exploration of the heavenly bodies and the four sublunar elements and culminating in an exploration of the human soul and phenomena associated with it. In detailing each part, he points to the treatises or sections in which Aristotle treated the subject, beginning with *Physics*, continuing with *On the Heavens*, *On Generation and Degeneration*, *Meteorology*, *On Minerals*, *On Plants*, and *On Animals*, and ending with the treatises *On the Soul* and *Parva Naturalia*.⁶³ The divine science is divided into three topics and confined to one Aristotelian text, *Metaphysics*. The topics are as follows: 1) the existents and the accidents accompanying them; 2) the foundations of each science; 3) non-corporeal entities, their different ranks, the First Cause (God), God's attributes, how the existents came to be from God, their ranks, their connections with each other, and their perfection. The first topic is equivalent to the study of being *qua* being.⁶⁴

Maimonides is aware of Alfarabi's approach and adopts it, though in none of his writings does he follow it slavishly. In *Commentary on the Mishnah: Hāgigah* and *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah, Maimonides offers two different divisions between the natural sciences and the divine science. In the former treatise, he does not elaborate on the scope of the natural sciences, but includes a list of topics belonging to the divine science: a study of being in general; a study of God, His attributes and His role as the cause of all existents; a study of the angels, which Maimonides does not identify in this

63 It is strongly doubted that the treatises *On Minerals* and *On Plants* were written by Aristotle. He did write five treatises devoted to living creatures, which were condensed in the Arabic version to a single treatise, *On Animals*. *Parva Naturalia* consists of a number of his short treatises devoted to dreams, divination, and the factors that determine the length of life. Ibn Falaquera cites Alfarabi's list in his treatise *Reshit Hōkhmah* (*The Beginning of Wisdom*), but then offers a slightly different division; see Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera, *Reshit Hōkhmah*, ed. David Moritz (Berlin: M. Poppelauer Press, 1902), 50-52.

64 La "Classificone delle Science," 29-31; cf. Ibn Falaquera, *Reshit Hōkhmah*, 53-55. Ibn Falaquera posits five divisions of the divine science, essentially subdividing Alfarabi's third division into three parts: 1) God; 2) the eternal spiritual existents (the Separate Intellects) and the secondary spiritual existents (either the Active Intellect or the souls of the spheres) that are appointed over the heavens and govern nature; 3) knowledge that the heavenly bodies and those of the lower world are subservient to these spiritual existents.

context, but elsewhere in his commentary he treats as the Separate Intellects; and a study of the human soul and immortality. In contrast to Alfarabi, Maimonides does not mention the principles of the individual sciences among the topics of the divine science, and he sees the study of the soul and immortality as belonging to this science, and not to the natural sciences. In the *Mishneh Torah*, he distinguishes between the Account of the Chariot and the Account of Creation on the basis of the distinction between incorporeal and corporeal existents. The issue of the nature of substance in general is not mentioned, and more significantly, the nature of the human soul and its immortality are included in a discussion of the natural sciences, not the divine science. In both sources, the topic of the celestial bodies belongs to the Account of Creation, in the former implicitly and in the latter explicitly. It should be noted that Maimonides' division here is reminiscent of, though not identical to, the distinction between the divine science and the natural sciences in the *Treatise on Logic*, irrespective of the problem of whether he is the author of this work.⁶⁵ In the fourteenth chapter of the *Treatise on Logic*, the divine science is divided into two parts, the first dealing with the incorporeal existents—God and the Separate Intellects—and the second with the “remote causes of the subject matter of the other sciences.”⁶⁶ The natural sciences, on the other hand, deal with all existents in nature, ranging from the minerals to the animals, and their properties.⁶⁷ In this classification, neither the study of the human soul nor the spheres is mentioned explicitly.

The reason for the ambivalent position occupied by a study of the human soul is not hard to discern. On one hand, the human soul is attached to a body, hence its study belongs to the natural sciences.

65 Maimonides' authorship of this work has been challenged by Herbert Davidson, “The Authenticity of Works attributed to Maimonides,” in *Me'ab She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life*, ed. Ezra Fleischer et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2001), 118-125. See, however, Ahmad Hasnawi, “Réflexions sur la terminologie logique de Maïmonide et son contexte farabien: Le *Guide des perplexes* et la *Traité de logique*,” in *Maïmonide: Philosophe et Savant*, ed. Tony Lévy and Roshdi Rashed (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 69-73.

66 See Israel Efros (ed. and trans.), *Maimonides' Treatise on Logic* (New York: American Academy of Jewish Research, 1938), 63.

67 *Ibid.*

Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul* was classified by Alfarabi as the culminating work on the natural sciences as we have seen. On the other hand, the soul has the potential of achieving the state of immortality as an incorporeal being, hence its study belongs to the divine science.⁶⁸ At any rate, Maimonides reverts to a more strict Aristotelian approach in the *Mishneh Torah*.

Maimonides' approach in the *Guide* reiterates his identification of the Account of Creation and Account of the Chariot with the Aristotelian sciences,⁶⁹ and at the same time complicates matters. He includes in his treatise a commentary, albeit an esoteric one, on the Account of the Chariot in the book of Ezekiel. Moreover, he indicates in his introduction to this commentary that it is not based on a received tradition (*Guide* 3.introduction: 416):

There is the fact that in that which has occurred to me with regard to these matters I followed conjecture and supposition; no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe in these matters from a teacher. But the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises that I possess, showed me that things are indubitably so. Yet it is possible that they are different and that something else is intended.

The speculative premises are clearly those of Aristotelian philosophy, as a comparison of his commentary with his discussion on God's governance of the world at the beginning of part 2 of the *Guide* makes evident.⁷⁰

68 Maimonides' source for including the study of the soul in the divine science is less clear. In his encyclopedia, *Al-Shifā'*, Avicenna deals with the human soul and its immortality in the section devoted to the natural sciences, but he returns to the latter topic toward the end of his discussion of the divine science.

69 See *Guide* 1.introduction: 6, 9; 1.34: 77; 2.2: 253-254. Page numbers refer to Shlomo Pines' translation of *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). All English citations from the *Guide* in this chapter are taken from this edition.

70 Maimonides himself notes in *Guide* 2.2 the relation of these chapters to the natural and divine sciences. In *Guide* 2.6: 265, he summarizes his position on this issue: "There is then nothing in what Aristotle for his part has said about this subject that is not in agreement with the Law. However, a point on which he disagrees with us

What is far less clear is the scope of the Account of the Chariot or the divine science according to his discussion in the *Guide*. In 1.35: 80-81, he writes:

As for the discussion concerning attributes and the way they should be negated with regard to Him; and as for the meaning of the attributes that may be ascribed to Him, as well as the discussion concerning His creation of that which He created, the character of His governance of the world, the “how” of His providence with respect to what is other than He, the notion of His will, His apprehension, and His knowledge of all that He knows; and likewise as for the notion of prophecy and the “how” of its various degrees, and the notion of His names, though they are many, being indicative of one and the same thing—it should be considered that all these are obscure matters. In fact, they are truly the mysteries of the Torah and the secrets constantly mentioned in the books of the prophets and in the dicta of the Sages, may their memory be blessed. These are the matters that ought not to be spoken of except in chapter headings, as we have mentioned, and only with an individual such as has been described.

While Maimonides does not explicitly equate these topics with the Account of the Chariot or the divine science, he labels them “mysteries of the Torah” and applies to them the same limitations that the Sages placed on the study of the Account of the Chariot.⁷¹ Some of the topics belonging to the divine science that we have seen till now are not mentioned explicitly, such as a study of being *qua* being and angels or Separate Intellects (though the latter topic is subsumed in God’s governance). Instead, other topics are included: creation, divine governance, divine providence, and prophecy. A number of these topics are mentioned explicitly in some of Avicenna’s treatises as belonging to the divine science.⁷² It should be added that Maimonides’ discussion of

in all this is constituted by his belief that all these things are eternal and that they proceed necessarily from Him.”

71 See Altmann, “Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” 110.

72 In his *Compendium on the Soul*, Avicenna lists the following topics as belonging to the divine science: proof of the First Cause; the first effect; the universal soul; the way in which creation occurs; the rank of the intellect with respect to the creator, the soul to the intellect, matter and forms to the soul, the spheres, stars and generated beings to matter and form, and why there is such a stark divergence in priority

divine governance of the world in *Guide* 2.2-12 follows directly on the heels of his proofs for the existence of God, which certainly belongs to the divine science.

The situation becomes even more perplexing when one turns directly to Maimonides' commentary on the Account of the Chariot in the beginning of the third part of the *Guide* and contrasts it with his commentary on the Account of Creation found in *Guide* 2.30. More specifically, it is significant to see how he treats the study of the heavenly spheres in light of his earlier approach to the subject. In his Account of Creation, Maimonides explicitly indicates that *ba-shamayim* in the first verse of Genesis refers to heaven and "all that is in heaven," a clear reference to the celestial bodies. Later on in his discussion he cites the *midrash* that states that God created the heavenly bodies on the first day and suspended them in the heavens on the fourth.⁷³ He goes on to indicate, however, that the subsequent appearance of *shamayim*, which is equated with the firmament (*ba-raqi'a*) in Genesis 1:8, refers to the earth's atmosphere and that both terms are equivocal. To prove the equivocality of the term *raqi'a*, he cites Genesis 1:17, which deals with God's creation on the fourth day: *and God set them in the firmament of heaven*. In this context, *raqi'a* refers to the heavens, and the verse comes to indicate that all the planets are located in the heavenly sphere and there is no void in the heavens. Maimonides refrains from explaining the meaning of the suspension of the planets on this day. It appears that he should be interpreted as alluding to their relation to earthly phenomena,⁷⁴ and not their literally being

and posteriority among them. See Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition*, 252. This list may be seen as an expansion of that of Alfarabi, mentioned above, which includes among metaphysical topics the ranks of the existents and their connections with each other. Gutas notes the differences in Avicenna's writings regarding the topics included in the divine science, and ascribes to him an attempt to expand the list in order to include topics that are central to Islam. See *ibid.*, 252-261.

73 See BT Ḥagigah 12a.

74 See below.

“suspended” in the heavens on that day. In short, his discussion suggests that the entire creation story focuses on the earth and its creatures.⁷⁵

More startling, he sees R. Akiva’s warning to his colleagues not to cry out “water water,” recorded in the context of the story of the four who entered *pardes* in BT Ḥagigah 14b, as pertaining to the nature of the atmosphere, and points to Aristotle’s *Meteorology*—at least according to the medieval and most of the modern translations of the *Guide*—as providing the key to understanding this story.⁷⁶ Toward the end of the *Guide* (3.51), Maimonides indicates that Ben Zoma, one of the protagonists of the story, engaged only in the study of the mathematical sciences and had not yet reached an understanding of the natural sciences. He thereby confirms his view that R. Akiva was dealing with a topic belonging to the natural sciences. Maimonides includes in his account a discussion of the human soul and human intellection as represented in the story of Adam and Eve and their children.⁷⁷ The conclusion to be drawn from Maimonides’ discussion is that the Account of Creation concerns all existents up to the sphere of the moon, including the human soul, but not beyond.

Maimonides’ commentary on the Account of the Chariot is even more veiled than the one on the Account of Creation, in keeping with the nature of its subject matter.⁷⁸ He writes in introducing his commentary (3.introduction: 416):

75 For a detailed analysis of Maimonides’ treatment of the creation story, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1987) (Heb.).

76 Only Joseph Kafih among the translators of the *Guide* does not interpret Maimonides as referring here to Aristotle’s work. See his edition and Hebrew translation of the *Guide* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1972), 384 n. 53. For a discussion of Maimonides’ interpretation of this story, see Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Story of Creation*, 160-174.

77 For a detailed analysis of Maimonides’ allegorical treatment of this story, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides’ Interpretation of the Adam Stories in Genesis* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1986) (Heb.).

78 For a study of Maimonides’ interpretation in the *Guide* of the Account of the Chariot, see Shoey Raz, “Metaphysics and the Account of the Chariot: Maimonides and Ishaq Ibn Laṭīf,” *Daat* 64-66 (2009): 139-149 (Heb.).

I shall interpret to you that which was said by Ezekiel the prophet, peace be on him, in such a way that anyone who heard that interpretation would think that I do not say anything over and beyond what is indicated by the text, but that it is as if I translated words from one language to another or summarized the meaning of the external sense of the speech.

Maimonides cautions his astute readers to understand all the chapters of the treatise, “every chapter in its turn,”⁷⁹ in order to understand his interpretation. In his discourse on the Account of the Chariot, he constantly alludes to views he presents at the beginning of part two of the *Guide* dealing with God’s governance of the world through the mediation of the Separate Intellects and the spheres, thereby establishing a strong connection, if not identity, between these subjects.⁸⁰ While commentators were hardly of one opinion as to how to interpret Maimonides’ approach to the Account of the Chariot in the third part of the *Guide*, one point emerges clearly—the celestial spheres constitute one of the main subjects in Ezekiel’s vision and at least some of the classes of angels Ezekiel mentions refer to them. This view is reminiscent of that of Ibn Daud on the subject, as we have seen above.⁸¹ Moreover, Maimonides’ comments clearly suggest that the *ḥayyot* and *ofannim* refer to the spheres and the four elements respectively.⁸² This approach reflects a sharp break with his earlier stance in the *Mishneh Torah*, in which the topic of the spheres belongs to natural science or the Account of Creation, while the *ḥayyot* and *ofannim* described in the Account of the Chariot in Ezekiel refer to the two highest classes of Separate Intellects.⁸³ Just as surprising is Maimonides’ explicit claim

79 Compare to what he writes in *Guide* 1.introduction: 15.

80 See above, note 70.

81 See above, note 47; see also Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and his Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 350.

82 See *Guide* 3.2-3. In his discussion, Maimonides also interprets the opinion of Yonathan ben Uziel based on the Aramaic translation of Ezekiel that bears his name. From his interpretation it is clear that he ascribes to Yonathan ben Uziel the view that the *ḥayyot* refer to the Separate Intellects and the *ofannim* refer to the spheres. See *Guide* 3.4. Maimonides, however, does not accept this opinion, as can be clearly inferred from his discussion.

83 *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 2.7.

that the image of the man sitting on the throne does not represent God,⁸⁴ leaving us to interpret this image as referring to the Mover of the outermost sphere. Thus the most detailed vision belonging to the Account of the Chariot leaves out the most important subject of the divine science—the Deity. As for the content of Ezekiel’s vision, Maimonides’ exposition suggests that Ezekiel described four primary celestial spheres containing the planets and stars, an astronomic possibility that he defends in *Guide* 2.9. One should keep in mind that the dominant astronomic conception, the one Maimonides himself followed in his Laws of Principles of the Torah, posits eight such spheres, in keeping with the view that Mercury and Venus were situated between the Moon and the Sun.⁸⁵ His discussion leads to the problem of the veracity of Ezekiel’s vision, or whether the view apparently favored by Ezekiel should be preferred to the dominant scientific view due to its prophetic origin.⁸⁶

84 *Guide* 3.7: 430.

85 Maimonides reiterates this position in *Guide* 2.19, though one may argue that he simply is reiterating the dominant scientific view in this context. More significantly, he brings the same position again in *Guide* 3.14, and also sees it as the position of the Sages.

86 See *Guide* 2.9-10; cf. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 3.1-2. For a discussion of Maimonides’ positing of four spheres, see Gad Freudenthal, “Maimonides on the Scope of Metaphysics *alias* Ma’aseh Merkavah: The Evolution of his Views.” Freudenthal argues that Maimonides in fact changed his mind from the time he wrote the *Mishneh Torah* and came to favor the view of four spheres which he presents as his own innovation. Freudenthal may be correct in his interpretation (however, see the previous note), but it should be pointed out that Maimonides presents this view, which he traces to the “ancients,” as a possibility that concerns primarily an astronomic issue, not a philosophic one. Maimonides does not at all retreat from the Aristotelian view of the structure of the world. Aristotle himself, Maimonides notes, never decided the issue of the number of spheres, and had posited fifty (*Guide* 2.4). Moreover, Maimonides seems less drawn to this view, if he in fact accepted it, because of its apparently prophetic origin and more because of the symmetry that it introduces into the order of the world—four sublunar elements, four levels of sublunar existents, four causes for the motion of the spheres and four spheres affecting the elements (*Guide* 2.10). In short, if he favored this view it was primarily for *philosophic* reasons, despite the fact that he was well aware that astronomic considerations lend greater weight to the view that there are eight spheres containing heavenly bodies. The view of four spheres, however, made very little impact on his followers in Provence, none of whom, to the best of my knowledge, accepted it outright, and who generally

In his discussion of both the Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot, Maimonides cites a number of rabbinic homilies (*midrashim*), viewing them as allegorical elaborations upon the allegorical treatment of these subjects in Scripture. Yet in keeping with his remarks in the introduction to his treatise, he only hints at their true meaning. For example, he writes regarding the talmudic etymology of the electrum, *hashmal*, seen by Ezekiel (*Guide* 3.7: 429-430):

They have explained that the word *hashmal* is composed of two notions, *hash* and *mal*; this means, of the notion of rapidity, indicated by *hash*, and of that of cutting, indicated by *mal*, the intention being to combine through a simile two separate notions regarding two sides, above and below. They also give a second hint, saying that the word derives from the notions of speech and silence, saying: “they sometimes *hashoth* [are silent] and sometimes *memalleloth* [speak]” [BT Ḥagigah 13b]. They ascribe the meaning “silence” [to *hash*] from the verse: *beḥesheiti* [I have been silent] for a long time [Isaiah 42:14]; there is thus an allusion to two notions through the indication of speech without a sound. There is no doubt that their dictum: “they sometimes *hashoth* [are silent] and sometimes *memalleloth* [speak],” refers to a created thing.⁸⁷

The question immediately arises why Maimonides treats the Account of the Chariot as well as the Account of Creation in a veiled manner if the key to understanding them is the Aristotelian view of the structure

alternated between an attempt to interpret Ezekiel in keeping with the dominant astronomic view or to ascribe to Ezekiel an error. For a discussion of the possibility of prophetic error, see below.

87 Maimonides’ remarks here are exceptionally vague. The medieval interpreters of the *Guide* agreed that according to Maimonides *as the color of the hashmal* refers to the Separate Intellects, as does *the likeness of the man*. Though the Separate Intellects are incorporeal, they do not possess the same level of unity that characterizes God but are comprised of two notions. According to Moses Narboni in his commentary on the chapter, the upper part of each of the Separate Intellects alludes to the fact that it is the cause of the Intellect below it in the hierarchy of being, while the lower part alludes to the fact that it is an effect of the First Cause. In a similar vein, each one grasps itself as a possible existent, and this is the lower part, and grasps its Cause as necessitating its existence, and this is the upper part. This is the meaning of the two interpretations of the division in the word *hashmal* (rapidity-cutting/silence-speech). Compare the commentaries of Shem Tov Ibn Shem Tov, Efodi, and Asher Crescas to the chapter.

of the world, which he is willing to present quite explicitly in the *Guide*.⁸⁸ If the angels seen by Ezekiel refer to the celestial spheres, the knowledge of which is quite readily available to anyone engaged in philosophic study, why did he not see fit to offer a clear cut exposition of the subject and append it to the chapters on divine governance in part two? One may contend that the *extent* of the correspondence between the prophetic and philosophic views is precisely the fact that must remain hidden from the masses. Maimonides is willing to guide his readers to the view that the prophets are not describing worlds beyond those conceptualized by the philosophers, but he does not feel that the time is yet ripe to make the degree of their agreement completely explicit, to connect all the dots as it were, for the harmful effects it will have on the average believer.⁸⁹ His esoteric commentary still leaves room to interpret the prophets as referring to truths not ascertained by the philosophers, even if both groups share the same view of the basic structure of the world.

Maimonides' stature in the field of Jewish law lent great weight to his theological views in the eyes of the succeeding generations. Those who adopted his approach were left with a clear cut direction to follow in trying to understand the Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot, namely the study of the Aristotelian corpus, together with its most important commentators,⁹⁰ and the dominant astronomic treatises. The desired goal is the apprehension of the order of existents, or of *being*, culminating in knowledge of God in accordance with human

88 See Davidson, *Moses Maimonides*, 351.

89 This interpretation complements Narboni's view as cited by Abarbanel; see above, note 2. Significantly, Maimonides, in a crucial sense, was more explicit in the revelation of these matters in the Laws of Principles of the Torah. See Shlomo Pines, "The Philosophical Purport of Maimonides' Halakhic Works and the Purport of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed. Shlomo Pines and Yirmiyahu Yovel (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1986), 1-14. See also Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 189-223.

90 See Maimonides' recommended bibliography of philosophic works that should be studied that he sent to his translator, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, in Isaac Shailat (ed. and Heb. trans.), *Iggerot HaRambam* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1987), vol. 2, 552-554. Shlomo Pines translates excerpts from this letter and discusses Maimonides' bibliography in the introduction to his translation of the *Guide*, "The Philosophic Sources of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," lvii-cxxxiv (particularly lix-lxi).

capacity. They were also instructed to interpret rabbinic *midrash* along philosophic lines. At the same time, they were left to wrestle with many problems as to the details of these accounts and their subject matter, which Maimonides had failed to elucidate. Given the parable form in which Scripture presents these subjects, it is no easy matter to decipher the true meaning of each of the verses contained in the scriptural accounts. The same is the case with the rabbinic homilies. Even the topics that belong to the Account of the Chariot and the ones that belong to the Account of Creation are not clearly delineated. More important, Maimonides' followers were faced with the problem of determining to what extent the prophets should be seen as Aristotelian philosophers and the content of their visions, after they are stripped of the images in which they are presented, should be interpreted as corresponding to the philosophic understanding of the natural and divine sciences. Does not the content of their visions go beyond the knowledge possessed by the philosophers?⁹¹ Or perhaps the opposite is true, and through advances in science one now is in a position to discern what even Ezekiel could not?⁹² The stakes for the future of Judaism were immense. Despite the esoteric nature of Maimonides' commentary, it opened up the question of the relevance of the writings of the prophets, as well as rabbinic literature, for attaining the theoretical

91 Maimonides suggests that this is the case in his discussion of creation (*Guide* 2.23) as well as his discussion of prophecy (*Guide* 2.38). A further hint to this view can be found in the parable of the lightning flashes that he brings in 1.introduction: 7. The prophets are depicted as seeing the world in a direct manner when illuminated by a flash of lightening, while the philosophers see it by way of reflection by means of a polished stone. For a further discussion of this issue, see below, chapter 8, 278.

92 Maimonides leaves no doubt that while the homilies of the Sages of the Talmud should be interpreted along philosophic lines, at least those of the greatest of the Sages, not all of the views reflected in rabbinic *midrash* are correct. See for example his stance in *Guide* 1.introduction: 20, on the reasons for contradictions in the *midrash*; cf. 2.8: 267. In the case of the prophets, his explicit statements on the subject indicate his acceptance of the complete truth of their knowledge, but we shall see that this may not have been his personal view. Even if the indefatigability of the prophets is his true position on the issue, the problem remains how to interpret their views.

knowledge by which human perfection is achieved in a far more explicit manner than any of the writings of his predecessors.⁹³

The Account of the Chariot in Jewish Philosophy in Provence till the End of the Thirteenth Century

The first translator of the *Guide*, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, wrestled with some of these problems in his writings, particularly in his treatise *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim* (*Treatise of the Gathering of the Waters*), written between the years 1221-1231. Ibn Tibbon views the desire to inculcate in the masses the belief in the existence of God as the reason for the Bible concealing certain conceptions which might weaken this belief, in light of the idolaters' belief that the stars are the deities.⁹⁴ Yet biblical history for him contains increasing allusions to these secret conceptions, beginning with the writings of David and Solomon, and continuing in rabbinic times with further elaborations by way of *midrash*. According to Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides continues the tendency of revealing these doctrines, albeit still in an elusive manner, after he discerned that few were capable of understanding the purport of the allusions found in the previous literature.⁹⁵ Ibn Tibbon sees himself as the next link in this chain, but he, unlike his predecessors, decided to make these doctrines completely explicit. What has made the task of revealing esoteric doctrines all the more pressing is the spread of the sciences among his Christian neighbors:

93 For a discussion of this issue, see my "Esotericism to Exotericism: From Maimonides to Gersonides," in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2006), vol. 1, 165-184.

94 Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, ed. Mordechai Bisliches (Pressburg: Anton Edlen v. Schmid, 1837), chap. 22, 174. For a study of Samuel Ibn Tibbon's thought, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87-123; James T. Robinson, "Maimonides, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, and the Construction of a Jewish Tradition of Philosophy," in *Maimonides after 800 Years: Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. Jay M. Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 291-306; Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel Ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of Dalālat al-Hā'irīm into the Moreh Nevukhim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007), 1-227 (Heb.).

95 This appears to be Maimonides' own view, as emerges from his discussion in the introduction to the *Guide*.

It is time to act for the sake of God [Psalms 119:126]. I saw that the truths that were concealed since [the time of] our prophets and the Sages of our Torah have become well known among the nations of the world, and in most places they interpret [Scripture] in accordance with the truths concealed in the Torah and in the words of the prophets and those speaking by means of the holy spirit. Our nation is ignorant of them completely, and by virtue of this ignorance they [the gentiles] mock us and abuse us saying that we only possess the shells of the words of the prophets. . . .

I, the youngster who follow him [Maimonides], also saw that [the number of] those understanding his hints has greatly declined, all the more so those who understand the hints in Scripture. I saw also that the true sciences have become much better known among the nations under whose sovereignty and in whose lands I live—much more than the familiarity with them in the lands of Ishmael. And I perceived the great need to illuminate the eyes of the intelligent by the knowledge and understanding of His words that God has granted me.⁹⁶

Like Maimonides, Ibn Tibbon does not claim that he received any tradition in this area. Rather, it is the study of the *Guide* and the Aristotelian corpus, which provides him with the key to understanding the esoteric doctrines found in the Bible and elaborated upon by the Sages. He does not present a running commentary on the Account of the Chariot but devotes a number of chapters to elucidating issues in Isaiah's and Ezekiel's accounts and in Maimonides' commentary on these accounts.⁹⁷ He also sees Jacob's dream of a heavenly ladder as belonging to this subject.⁹⁸ Thus Isaiah and Ezekiel, according to this view, essentially elaborate upon a subject that is already to be found in the Torah.

96 *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 22, 175. This is the passage to which Abarbanel alludes in his first stricture; see above, note 2.

97 See Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel Ibn Tibbon*, 176-184.

98 See *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 11, 54-57. Maimonides deals with this prophetic parable in *Guide* 2.10, which touches upon a number of topics that belong to the Account of the Chariot. For a study of this parable in Maimonides' thought, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Maimonides' Interpretations of Jacob's Dream of the Ladder," *Bar-Ilan* 22-23 (1988): 329-349 (Heb.). For the significance of the motif of the ladder in medieval Arabic and Jewish thought, see Alexander Altmann, "The Ladder of Ascension," in *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (London: Routledge, 1969), 41-72.

A number of significant points emerge clearly from Ibn Tibbon's discussion, following up on some of the hints Maimonides scattered in his theological treatise:

1) The study of the celestial spheres—their essence, structure, and motion—belongs to the Account of the Chariot.⁹⁹ Astronomy thus is not only a propaedeutic science, but its principles, at least, constitute a component of the divine science.

2) Ibn Tibbon sees the *ḥayyot* in Ezekiel's vision as referring to the celestial spheres, and the *ofannim* to the four sublunar elements.¹⁰⁰ Consequently, there is an overlap between the Account of Creation and the Account of the Chariot. The former focuses on sublunar phenomena and notes the roles played by the celestial spheres and the Active Intellect in bestowing the sublunar forms, though Ibn Tibbon points to the philosophic controversy, found also among the Sages, concerning the problem of which existents receive their form from the Active Intellect.¹⁰¹ The Account of the Chariot too deals with the Separate Intellects, the celestial spheres, and the earthly elements, but from the standpoint of their connection to God and how they serve as intermediaries in the divine governance of the world. In short, both sciences deal with the same entities, but from a different perspective.

3) Ibn Tibbon does not address the problem of the extent of the identity of the views of the prophets and those of the philosophers directly, but a number of his positions are worthy of note. Like Maimonides, he treats many problems regarding astronomy as remaining open.

⁹⁹ *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chaps. 8-10, 28-53.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. 10, 45-48. As we have seen above, this is the most likely interpretation of Maimonides' approach. The *serafim* in Isaiah 6:2, on the other hand, represent the Separate Intellects in Ibn Tibbon's view.

¹⁰¹ Ibn Tibbon interprets the controversy between R. Yoḥanan and R. Ḥanina on what day the angels were created, the former saying the second and the latter the fifth (*Genesis Rabbah* 1:3), as relating to the philosophic controversy regarding which earthly existents require the mediation of the Separate Intellect. Do the existents possessing a vegetative soul created on the third day require the Separate Intellect in order to exist, or does the human being, who was created on the sixth day, alone among the sublunar creatures requires the mediation of the Separate Intellect to grant the rational soul? See *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 4, 12-15; and Robinson, "Maimonides, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, and the Construction of a Jewish Tradition of Philosophy," 300-301.

He approvingly cites a more recent astronomic theory regarding the direction of the orbit of the spheres—according to which all nine spheres move from east to west rather than west to east, with the exception of the outermost sphere—indicating that progress in this area is still being made.¹⁰² On some questions, he favors the accepted philosophic view over what appears to be the prophetic view. He hints, for example, that Maimonides alludes to an error in Ezekiel's prophecy, which ascribes sounds to the heavenly bodies.¹⁰³ The notion that the spheres produce sounds, Maimonides maintains (*Guide* 2.8), is in accord with the view accepted by the Sages, but rejected by Aristotle, that the spheres are stationary and the planets within them move. Both Maimonides and Ibn Tibbon favor Aristotle in this matter. Ibn Tibbon regards these questions as belonging completely to the area of speculation rather than tradition (and by implication prophecy), as evidenced by the fact that the Sages were not convinced that they were correct in their view of the movement of the planets, and on a different astronomic issue even acceded to the view of the gentile scholars.¹⁰⁴ As for

102 *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 10, 47-48. The reference is to the astronomic views of Al-Biṭrūjī found in his *On the Principles of Astronomy*, written in Arabic at the end of the twelfth century and subsequently translated into Hebrew by Moses Ibn Tibbon. An English translation of this work was prepared by Bernard R. Goldstein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971). For a discussion of Ibn Tibbon's references to Al-Biṭrūjī and for an English translation of the passage in *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim* in which Al-Biṭrūjī's view is presented, see James T. Robinson, "The First References in Hebrew to Al-Biṭrūjī's *On the Principles of Astronomy*," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism* 3 (2003): 145-163. Maimonides himself notes the progress made in the area of astronomy in *Guide* 3.14.

103 *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 10, 52. Ibn Tibbon writes in reference to Ezekiel 3:13: "As to the matter of the sound of the wings—he [Maimonides] already alluded to it in the second part in a sufficient manner." For a study of the issue in medieval Jewish philosophy of the possibility of prophetic error, see Charles Touati, "Le problème de l'inerrance prophétique dans la théologie juive du moyen-âge," *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 174 (1968): 169-187.

104 *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 10, 52. As opposed to Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides does not explicitly mention Ezekiel in this context; hence it is not clear whether he was of the opinion that Ezekiel too was mistaken in regard to the motion of the spheres. He may have understood the verse in a manner that was in harmony with the accepted scientific opinion. The issue of how Maimonides was to be interpreted in regard to the sounds heard by Ezekiel, as well as whether Ezekiel's view was to be preferred over the accepted scientific one, was a matter of controversy

the opinion that Mercury and Venus are above the sun, Ibn Tibbon points out that Maimonides favors this view, which also appears to underlie Ezekiel's vision.¹⁰⁵ In this case, however, he does not indicate explicitly which view he accepts, though his discussion suggests that he favors the dominant view placing Mercury and Venus below the sun. While astronomic views provide the key to interpreting Ezekiel's vision, the vision itself appears to have no import in determining the correctness of a certain view in Samuel Ibn Tibbon's treatment.

4) Ibn Tibbon cannot accept Maimonides' view that the man on the throne in Ezekiel's vision, as opposed to Isaiah's, does not refer to God.¹⁰⁶ The Deity is the ultimate subject of the divine science. Maimonides had argued that since Ezekiel talks of two parts of the figure sitting on the throne, it cannot be a reference to the one God. Ibn Tibbon suggests that the figure represents God and the Separate Intellects, with the upper part referring to God and the lower to the Separate Intellects, or the upper part to God and the Separate Intellects and the lower to the Active Intellect. Hence both visions deal with the same topics—Isaiah providing a more detailed treatment of God and the Separate Intellects, according to Ibn Tibbon, and Ezekiel focusing more on the spheres and their governance of the sublunar elements.¹⁰⁷

Ibn Tibbon was not the only early Provençal Jewish thinker to deal with the topic of the Account of the Chariot in the spirit of Maimonides. His contemporary, R. David Kimḥi (Radak), who in most of his commentaries further develops Ibn Ezra's philological approach, wrote

among later interpreters; see Ofer Elior, "The Conclusion whose Demonstration is Correct is Believed': Maimonides on the Possibility of Celestial Sounds, According to Three Medieval Interpreters," *Revue des études juives* 172 (2013): 283-303.

105 *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 10, 53.

106 Compare *Guide* 3.7, where Maimonides deals with Ezekiel's vision, and *Guide* 2.45 (seventh degree of prophecy), where he indicates that Isaiah saw God in a prophetic dream. Maimonides maintains that the prophet, however, cannot see God in a prophetic vision (that is to say, when the prophet receives the prophetic emanation while awake).

107 *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 10, 50-52.

an esoteric commentary on the beginning of Ezekiel.¹⁰⁸ In a way, his commentary is more faithful to Maimonides in that it is more esoteric than that of Ibn Tibbon, though its intent is clear to a reader versed in philosophy. For Kimḥi too the true intent of the vision is to describe the world of Separate Intellects and celestial spheres, and to show God's governance of the world by way of these intermediaries. What is absent from his commentary is any allusion to the scientific controversies relating to the structure and motion of the celestial world or to the possibility of prophetic error.

In subsequent Jewish philosophical literature in the thirteenth century, we find further treatments of the scope and content of the divine science. The most detailed, extant Jewish philosophical account of the divine science is to be found in Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera's *De'ot ha-Filosofim*.¹⁰⁹ This encyclopedia is devoted solely to the natural and divine sciences and is based primarily on Averroes' commentaries on Aristotle.¹¹⁰ Ibn Falaquera divides the section on the divine science into

108 The esoteric Ezekiel commentary is printed in the back of Miqra'ot Gedolot editions of Ezekiel. The best edition of this text has recently been published in Menachem Cohen (ed.), *Miqra'ot Gedolot 'HaKeter': Ezekiel* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2004), 329-333. It should be noted that Kimḥi also wrote an esoteric commentary on the Garden of Eden story, which is found in Louis Finkelstein (ed.), *The Commentary of David Kimḥi on Isaiah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1926), lii-lxxiv (Heb.). For a study of Kimḥi, see Frank E. Talmage, *David Kimḥi: The Man and the Commentaries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

109 The section on the divine science survived intact in MS Parma 3156, 234r-292v, and in part in MS Leiden 4758, 333v-343v. For a discussion of this encyclopedia, see Steven Harvey, "Shem-Tov Ibn Falaquera's *De'ot ha-Filosofim*: Its Sources and Use of Sources," in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy*, 211-247. For a discussion of the place of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (or more precisely Averroes' commentaries on the *Metaphysics*) in this encyclopedia, see Mauro Zonta, "The Place of Aristotelian *Metaphysics* in the Thirteenth-Century Encyclopedias," in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy*, 422-425. For a discussion of Ibn Falaquera and his works, see Raphael Jospe, *Torah and Sophia: The Life and Thought of Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1988). It should be noted that it is not clear whether Falaquera, who probably was born in Spain, wrote any of his treatises in Provence.

110 Ibn Falaquera also wrote a short compendium of the sciences, *Reshit Hokhmah*, which is based primarily on Alfarabi's *Enumeration of the Sciences* and Avicenna's *Division of the Theoretical Sciences*. For a discussion of this work, see Jospe, *Torah and Sophia*, 37-42; see also above, notes 63-64.

three parts. In the first he discusses the Active Intellect; in the second, the various types of substance and their underlying principles, as well as the secondary principles—that is, the Movers of the spheres (the Separate Intellects); and in the third, God as Prime Mover and First Cause. Among the topics he includes in the last treatise are divine unity, governance of the world, the order of emanation from God, and the manner in which all existents are connected to God.¹¹¹ While Ibn Falaquera mentions the celestial spheres in the course of his discussion of emanation, his far more extensive treatment of this subject is in the last treatise of the section on natural sciences. Significantly, he treats this subject at the end of his discussion of the human soul. This reflects a break with the ordinary ordering of the subjects in Aristotelian thought—the treatise *On the Heavens* follows on the heels of the *Physics*, with the subject of the human soul (including the topics contained in *Parva Naturalia*, such as dreams and the longevity of life) as the final one rounding off the natural sciences.¹¹² The reason for this change may be Ibn Falaquera's desire to underscore the fact that the spheres are the most noble of corporeal beings, more noble even than human beings.¹¹³

Ibn Falaquera's ordering of subjects in his encyclopedia essentially reflects Maimonides' earlier division, one that is also supported by Alfarabi's division of the sciences, which sees the main distinction between the natural and divine sciences as revolving around corporeal and incorporeal existence. Thus the topic of the spheres belongs to the natural sciences. In keeping with the Aristotelian tradition, Ibn Falaquera includes the subject of substance and its underlying principles, as well as the relation between God and the world and the connection between all its parts as also belonging to the divine science.¹¹⁴

111 For a complete list of the topics of this section, see Jospe, *Torah and Sophia*, 60-61.

112 Such is the case in Alfarabi's list of subjects in the *Enumeration of the Sciences* as well as Ibn Falaquera's *Reshit Hokhmah*.

113 See *Guide* 3.13-14.

114 It should be noted that his short scientific compendium *Reshit Hokhmah* differs from his encyclopedia on a number of points. Under the influence of Avicenna, he includes prophecy and human immortality as "branches" of the divine science; see *Reshit Hokhmah*, 55 and compare with the end of the ninth and beginning of

Unfortunately, he has left us with no commentary on the Account of the Chariot, which would enable us to see how Ezekiel's vision is interpreted in light of his treatment of the divine science.¹¹⁵

A similar distinction between the natural and metaphysical sciences implicitly characterizes the most popular of the medieval Hebrew encyclopedias, Gershom ben Solomon's *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*, written at the turn of the thirteenth century.¹¹⁶ In this case too the section dealing with the spheres follows the section dealing with the human soul and immortality. The most striking feature of this encyclopedia is that it devotes no section to a discussion of metaphysics, neither to God nor to the Separate Intellects. Natural science, or the study of corporeal existents, is the sole subject of Gershom's treatise.¹¹⁷

The most extensive philosophic treatment of the Account of the Chariot in the latter part of the thirteenth century belongs to Levi ben Abraham. Levi completed the long recension of his encyclopedia, *Livyat Hen*, in 1296.¹¹⁸ He devotes a section to the divine science in the context of his discussion of the sciences—only a part of this section has survived—and another section to the Account of the Chariot in the context of his discussion of Judaism. In short, he is one of the few

the tenth book in the section on the divine science in Avicenna's *Al-Shifā'* (Michael E. Marmura [ed. and trans.], *Avicenna, The Metaphysics of The Healing* [Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005], 347-366). In *De'ot ha-Filosofim*, Ibn Falaquera deals with these subjects in the context of his treatment of the human soul.

115 In general, extant philosophic commentaries on the Account of the Chariot in the latter half of the thirteenth century are scarce. It appears that one such commentary was written by Moses Ibn Tibbon, but it has not survived. See my introduction to *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, and Avraham Israel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 30. Ibn Tibbon deals in passing with Ezekiel 1:26 and some other motifs from Ezekiel in *Sefer Pe'ab*; see *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 186-188. For a study of this thinker, see above, chapter 4.

116 This encyclopedia has been printed in a number of different editions, the most popular being Warsaw, 1876. For a study of this encyclopedia, see James T. Robinson, "Gershom ben Solomon's *Sha'ar ha-Shamayim*: Its Sources and use of Sources," in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy*, 248-274.

117 One can only hypothesize why he chose not to delve into the cream of the sciences. He may well have thought that this area should continue to be treated as the "secrets of the Torah" whose teachings should not be disseminated publicly.

118 For a study of this thinker and his encyclopedia, see above, chapter 5.

philosophers, if not the only one, to deal with the subject in detail from both a theoretical and an exegetical perspective. It should be noted that Levi also wrote a poem outlining all the sciences, *Batei ha-Nefesh ve-ha-Leḥashim*, which contains these two sections and helps us to complete, at least in outline form, the missing part of the section dealing with the divine science in *Livyat Hen*.¹¹⁹

Levi divides his account of the divine science into the following topics: infinity; space; motion; time; continuous and discreet; potentiality and actuality; substance and corporeality; unity and multiplicity; God as remote efficient, final and formal cause; proof of the existence of God and His Unity; the order of the Intellects and their activities; the ranks of the celestial bodies; the order in the world of generation, and good and evil; the level of the lower world; God's governance of the world in its entirety; the existence of multiplicity and unity; the name of the One and the Existent; negation [of attributes]; the sublime knowledge.¹²⁰ As one can see, included in his treatment of the divine science are not only topics related to God (e.g., divine unity, negative attributes) and the Separate Intellects, but also the principles of mathematics and physics (e.g., infinity, place, time, motion), and more significantly, the order of existents in the celestial and sublunar worlds and the manner in which God governs these worlds. In short, the divine science deals not only with incorporeal existents but is the science that gives us the big picture of all the parts of the world, their interconnection and their connection with God, as well as the principles of the other sciences. The natural sciences focus on the details of the existents in the sublunar world, culminating in a discussion of the human soul.¹²¹ The two primary sources for his discussion of

119 I have published the section of *Livyat Hen* devoted to the Account of the Chariot, the surviving part of the section on the divine science, together with the part of the poem devoted to the Account of the Chariot in Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013) (Heb.).

120 The list of topics is taken from the section on the divine science in Levi's poem. The section from the short version of the encyclopedia devoted to the proofs for the existence of God till the end has survived.

121 Levi's treatment of the natural sciences in *Livyat Hen* has not survived, but in this case too we can reconstruct the topics he deals with on the basis of his poem. In

the divine science are Maimonides' *Guide* and, more important, Averroes' *Epitome of the Metaphysics* as translated into Hebrew by Moses Ibn Tibbon.¹²²

In Levi's treatment of the Account of the Chariot, he explicates most of the points noted by Samuel Ibn Tibbon but in more detail, at times taking issue with Ibn Tibbon's interpretation. Levi also identifies additional biblical texts devoted to this subject, such as Zechariah 6—the one vision in which chariots are explicitly mentioned—and the vision of Elijah's ascent to heaven in I Kings 19, which deals in his view with conjunction. He also sees the *serafim* in Isaiah 6 as representing the Separate Intellects, with the one in whose hands is the live coal that touches the prophet's lips signifying the Active Intellect. As in the case of his predecessors, he regards the *hayyot* in Ezekiel's first vision as referring to the spheres and their motions, though he also brings additional interpretations. In the dispute between Maimonides and Samuel Ibn Tibbon as to the explanation of the man sitting on the throne, Levi prefers Maimonides' view that he does not represent God, and his two parts represent two levels of Separate Intellects.

The different versions of the Account of the Chariot, particularly Ezekiel's more detailed visions, focus only in passing on God, a little more on the Separate Intellects, and primarily on the spheres, their motions, and their influence on the four sublunar elements. As in the case of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Levi is well aware that Ezekiel's visions suggest two major issues on which he differs with accepted scientific opinion—the order of the planets and the view that they emit sounds, hence they move rather than remain stationary within the sphere. Levi does not reject the possibility of prophetic error out of hand, but he prefers to interpret Ezekiel's visions as corresponding to the accepted scientific opinion:

Batei ha-Nefesh, he does not treat the spheres at all in the section devoted to the natural sciences.

122 A far more detailed treatment of Levi's approach to the divine science as well as the Account of the Chariot can be found in my Hebrew introduction to *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, 53-97.

It appears to us that Ezekiel connected the five planets only insofar as they participate in a single type of activity.¹²³ The actions and great changes and disorders that occur in the sublunar world by virtue of the force [generated] by the motion of the spheres and planets, he called “din” (*ra‘ash*). And in this manner we can interpret the visions of Ezekiel in order not to ascribe to him a false opinion, as we shall explain.¹²⁴

In general, his commentary abandons all pretense of esotericism and discusses the various visions along scientific lines.¹²⁵

Following Maimonides and Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Levi approaches rabbinic *midrash* as expanding allegorically upon the philosophic ideas contained in the prophetic visions. The rabbinic etymology of *hashmal* as consisting of two words, *hash* (is silent) and *mal* (speaks),¹²⁶ he explains as follows:

Our Sages commented on the matter of the *hashmal*: “At times they are silent (*hash*) at times they speak (*mal*). When the utterance goes forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, they are silent . . .” [BT *Hagigah* 13b]. This means, insofar as each [Separate Intellect] receives the emanation from its Cause, it is said to be silent, and insofar as it emanates its effects [a different Separate Intellect and a sphere], since its intellect is in actu and apprehends and sees everything together in no time, it is said to speak.¹²⁷

Levi interprets the angel Sandalfon¹²⁸ as referring to the Active Intellect, and writes as follows:

“A *baraita* teaches: His name is Sandalfon; he is greater than his fellows by a distance of five hundred years’ journey, and he stands

123 This a reference to the fact that they all act primarily upon the element of air.

124 *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, chap. 3, 133-124; see also chap. 4, 147-148. See however chap. 4, 154, where Levi suggests that perhaps Ezekiel was in error.

125 It should be added that Levi sees predictions of future events as also included in these visions.

126 See above, note 9.

127 *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, chap. 6, 185. Levi anticipates the interpretation brought by later interpreters; see above, note 87.

128 See above, note 10.

behind the Chariot and wreathes crowns for his Maker” [BT Hagigah 13b]. They said: “stands behind the Chariot,” because he emanates from the Mover of the sphere of the Moon, which is the last of the *ḥayyot*, and he exercises providence and acts vis-à-vis the earth. A difficulty was raised on this point: “And wreathes crowns for his Maker. But is it so? Behold it is written: *Blessed be the Glory of the Lord from His place* [Ezekiel 3:12], accordingly, no one knows His place!” that is, He has no special place—for the objector understood this saying [about God] in a physical sense. Or perhaps he intended to resolve this ambiguity concerning his words, and he responded: “He [Sandalfon] pronounces the Name over the crown and it goes and rests on His head”—that is, he spoke in a non-corporeal sense. The meaning of this is that the truth of his intellection and comprehension arranges pleasant and truthful praises for his Maker, and he conjoins with Him and is perfected through Him, in the manner that the known conjoins with and is perfected by what is known.

Levi further maintains that just as Ezekiel’s visions hint also to astrological matters, the rabbinic homilies elaborate upon these matters in a figurative manner.¹²⁹

Perhaps the most novel aspect of Levi’s commentary is his summary description of the kabbalistic doctrine of the ten *sefirot* above the level of the angels or Separate Intellects and his critique of this doctrine:

Since the Pure Forms are ten, and there is no quantitative or spatial division between them, it is said: “Ten *sefirot* that are boundless (*beli mah*)” [Book of Creation 1.7]. It is taught that they have no extremities by which they can be joined, but their end is their beginning, as it is said: “their end is contained in their beginning” [ibid.]. There are those who interpreted “ten *sefirot*” ten crowns of praise and perfection in God, corresponding to His names, which are not separate in Him, for they all revert to one simple essence. Hence he says “boundless.” We already spoke of this in the ninth chapter of the section on faith.¹³⁰

The kabbalists considered the ten *sefirot* to be ten degrees (*ma’alot*), one above the other overflowing from it, and they called

129 For example, Levi cites the *midrash* in BT Yoma 77a based on Ezekiel 9.2, which he explains in terms of future events that result from the influences of the planets. See *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, chap. 4, 174-175.

130 This section survived only in the shorter version of Levi’s encyclopedia and the interpretation of this citation from the *Book of Creation* is not found there.

them “Emanations” (*Azilot*). The first three are spiritual, and are called: the Sublime Crown (*Keter* ‘*Elyon*), Wisdom (*Hokhmah*) and Understanding (*Binah*). The first one does not at all resemble any other thing. And the seven corporeal ones are called: Greatness (*Gedulah*), Might (*Gevurah*), Glory (*Tiferet*), Triumph (*Nezah*), Majesty (*Hod*), Truth (*Emet*), and Loving-kindness (*Hesed*). Abraham attained Loving-kindness and Jacob [attained] Truth, as it is stated: *Give truth to Jacob and Loving-kindness to Abraham* [Micah 7:20]. The lowest of them is called Land (*Erez*), and in this manner they interpret: [God] *blessed Abraham in everything (bakol)* [Genesis 24:1]. They say that the angels are below all of these, and there emanated from each *sefirah* one angel. The lowest *sefirah* is higher than the first of the angels. They assent to the view that the angels move the spheres, each one moves its designated sphere, it being its immediate cause. Each of these Emanations is divided into two branches, in accordance with the division into its powers and activities. For this reason, they attribute to them a right and a left side, and they mention the Great Hand.¹³¹ Moses grasped the *sefirah* *Tiferet*, as it is said: *That caused His glorious hand to go to the right of Moses* [Isaiah 63:12]. From some come the strong measure of mercy and from others the weak; from some the strong measure of judgment, from others the weak, and from others the intermediate. The human soul overflows from the third level called *Binah*, as it is said: *The breath of Shaddai that gives them understanding* [Job 32:8], and it is said: *And breathed into his nostrils* [Genesis 2:7]. For this reason, Israel is more dear [to God] than the ministering angels, and can grasp in his lifetime [the *sefirah*] *Emet* or *Hesed*, and after his separation from matter he returns to his source, which is [the *sefirah*] *Binah*. It is stated in the Jerusalem Talmud, in [the chapter] “*Bameh Madliqin*” (With What Do We Light): “[*And the appearance*] of the fourth is like an angel [Daniel 3:25]. He saw the angel put out the fire before them, and Hananya, Misha’el and ‘Azarya did not see him” [PT Shabbat 6, 9, 39b]. The reason for this is due to the fact that they became spiritual beings and conjoined with God and became greater to an angel.

There is no need to expand upon what we ascertained regarding the superiority of the level of the angels, for we already have done so. The *serafim* immediately follow the level of God, as it is written: *Serafim stand above him* [Isaiah 6:2], and it is stated: *Bless the Lord, O His angels, mighty creatures who do His bidding* [Psalms 103:20]. Furthermore, all their words are based on conjectures and imaginings, with no logical proofs. Furthermore, the first one who may be referred to as Wisdom is God. They maintain that they received

131 See Exodus 14:31.

these notions by way of tradition, and they bring proofs from verses and *midrashim* and from *Sefer HaBahir* which is ascribed to R. Neḥunya ben Haqanah.¹³²

It appears from his account that certain fundamental kabbalistic ideas had spread beyond kabbalistic circles by Levi's time, at the end of the thirteenth century, though we know of no famous kabbalists living in Provence in his period. The kabbalistic centers moved to Spain much earlier in the thirteenth century. One also does not find other Jewish philosophers in Provence reacting against the kabbalists in his period, or in the following generations, and one must go back in time half a century to find such a reaction—in *Milḥamet Mizvah* by Meir ben Simeon HaMe'ili of Narbonne, written between 1239 and 1245.¹³³ It is not clear from which sources Levi culled his knowledge, which on a number of significant points differs from the more accepted kabbalistic views of the time. It appears to reflect a later kabbalistic tradition that developed in Provence.¹³⁴ According to Levi's presentation, this tradition accepts much of the metaphysical worldview of the philosophers while adding another level of metaphysical reality and ascribing a much nobler position to the human soul—particularly of the Jews—which is reminiscent of Neoplatonic thought.¹³⁵ At any rate, Levi clearly felt

132 *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, chap. 6, 189-190.

133 This composition is primarily a polemic against Christianity, but toward the end HaMe'ili turns to an attack against the kabbalists; see MS Parma 2749, 228v-235v (part of this section was published by Gershon Scholem, "A New Document for the History of the Beginning of the Kabbalah," in: *Sefer Bialik*, ed. Jacob Fichman [Tel Aviv: Omanut, 1934], 148-150 [Heb.]). There is very little in common between Levi's criticism and that of HaMe'ili. It should be noted that the latter regards the *Sefer HaBahir* as a heretical work, while Levi regards it as an authentic rabbinic one, which reflects the change in this book's fortunes even among the Jewish philosophers of Provence by the end of the thirteenth century.

134 See most recently Ram Ben-Shalom, "Kabbalistic Circles Active in the South of France (Provence) in the Thirteenth Century," *Tarbiz* 82 (2014): 569-605 (Heb.).

135 For a discussion of the relation between Levi's presentation and the doctrines and motifs found in the kabbalistic sources of his period, see my introduction to *Livyat Hen: The Work of the Chariot*, 93-97. For a contrast between Neoplatonic and Aristotelian thought on the issue of the level of the human soul, see my "The Place of Man in the Hierarchy of Existence in the Philosophy of Ibn Gabirol and Maimonides," in *Alei Shefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought*, ed. Moshe Halamish (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1990), 95-107.

that it was important to respond to the kabbalistic doctrine as it was known to him, if only in passing, perhaps in part because the kabbalists rooted their doctrine in traditional texts, including the *Book of Creation*, which Levi, like the other Jewish philosophers of Provence, accepted as an authoritative text.

Levi rejects the kabbalistic approach for presenting fanciful notions without proof or authentic tradition, there being no level between God and the Separate Intellects in his view. Nor can human beings attain a level of knowledge and existence superior to that of the Separate Intellects. Levi's presentation and critique reflects his awareness of the emergence of a new mystical alternative to the philosophic approach, and he is one of the first to challenge it from a philosophic perspective.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how the mythical-mystical approach to prophetic texts as reflected in rabbinic *midrash* and the *Heikhalot* literature is replaced in Jewish philosophical circles by a scientific approach to the meaning of these texts, with the Aristotelian corpus and the works of the Arabic thinkers who drew from it providing the main key for their interpretation. It is also a story of a growing exotericism in the scientific interpretation of the text, due in part to the desire to meet certain cultural challenges—the acceptance of the authority of the older Jewish mystical tradition on the part of a wide circle of Jews in Maimonides' time while at the same time a sophisticated philosophical theology had already developed in the Islamic world, or the widespread knowledge of the sciences and their application to Scripture in Christian circles in Samuel Ibn Tibbon's time. In Levi's period a new challenge arises, the new mysticism that has appropriated much of Maimonides' approach but is closer in spirit to the rabbinic *midrash* and to the mystical-magical components of the older mysticism. Levi is one of the earliest philosophers to react against it, though he devotes only a brief discussion to it in his treatise.

In the Maimonidean tradition, the philosophic interpretation of the Account of the Chariot and the scope of the divine science focuses

on the entire order of existence in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the world, the understanding of which, in the eyes of the philosophers, leads to human perfection. The personal eschatological motive in this study—in this case, the attainment of immortality—plays a dominant role, just as it did in the rabbinic and early mystical tradition. For many of the Maimonidean philosophers, astronomy becomes a key component in the divine science, for it provides the basis for proving the existence of the Separate Intellects and God.

In a crucial sense, the acceptance and development of Maimonides' approach can be seen as undermining the authority of the Bible, as evidenced by the philosophic interpretation of the Account of the Chariot that I have mentioned, even though Ibn Tibbon, Levi, and many of the other philosophers maintained their loyalty to Judaism and attempted to harmonize between the two traditions. For all effective purposes, science and philosophy supplant religious tradition as the source of truth. This is not to say that the Aristotelian philosophers were in complete agreement with each other on all the cardinal issues, nor is it to deny that at times Jewish philosophers leaned toward those views that were more easily harmonized with Scripture.¹³⁶ Overall, tradition played a secondary role in determining the truth of a given scientific or philosophic view. How could it be otherwise, when the authoritative texts of Judaism were seen as presenting truths in an

136 Avicenna, being closer to the Islamic tradition than Averroes, presented many doctrines that were easier to harmonize with Jewish tradition, whether it be God as First Cause of the very existence of the world (by way of emanation) and not just the First Cause of all motion and change, individual immortality, the advantage of the prophet who attains illumination of the intellect over the philosopher, the occurrence of many of the miracles (albeit on the basis of a naturalistic explanation), and more. Despite the great influence of Averroes on all post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy, many of Avicenna's doctrines continued to be accepted by the Jewish philosophers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly in light of the fact that Maimonides presented many of the same doctrines. For a study of Avicenna's reception among Jewish thinkers, see Gad Freudenthal and Mauro Zonta, "Avicenna among Medieval Jews: The Reception of Avicenna's Philosophical, Scientific and Medical Writings in Jewish Cultures, East and West," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 22 (2012): 217-287.

esoteric manner, hence open to many different and even conflicting interpretations?

It is easy to see how Maimonides' approach to understanding Judaism in light of the philosophic tradition, and moreover, the growing exotericism displayed by the Jewish philosophers in Provence in promoting this approach, sets the stage for the conflicts in Provence and Spain concerning the status of philosophy and its application to Judaism which erupt in the fourth decade of the thirteenth century and again at the beginning of the fourteenth.¹³⁷

The trend among the Maimonideans of interpreting the Account of the Chariot in terms of Aristotelian philosophy continues throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At times this trend is opposed even by thinkers who appreciate philosophy but reject reducing the speculative teachings of Judaism to Aristotelian thought, as can be seen from the attack of Abarbanel.¹³⁸ This part of the story, however, will have to wait for a future telling.

Appendix: Some Comments on Maimonides' Esotericism

From Samuel Ibn Tibbon till modern times, the esoteric reading of Maimonides' philosophy has been based on the premise that the reason for his esotericism stems from religious-political concerns. That is to

137 A useful survey of these controversies remains: Joseph Sarachek, *Faith and Reason: The Conflict over the Rationalism of Maimonides* (New York: Bayard Press, 1935).

138 It should be noted that even among the Jewish philosophers of the thirteenth century, not all of them were content to equate the divine science with Aristotelian metaphysics. This point, for example, is evident when examining the early thirteenth-century encyclopedia by Judah ben Solomon ha-Cohen, *Midrash ha-Hokhmah*, written in Arabic in his native Spain and later translated by him into Hebrew when he moved to Italy. While recognizing Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as the basis for the study of divine science and offering a summary of this work based on Averroes' *Middle Commentary*, Judah is interested in showing the difference between Jewish divine science, based on revelation, and philosophic divine science, particularly as pertaining to God's role as creator. In addition to commenting on various verses and *midrashim*, Judah also enters into a theosophic discussion of the Hebrew alphabet. For a discussion of this encyclopedia, see the articles by Resianne Fontaine, Y. Tzvi Langermann, and Mauro Zonta in *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy*, 191-210, 371-389, 420-422 respectively.

say, it was dangerous for Maimonides to reveal to the masses some of his philosophic views, since these views would undermine their commitment to Judaism or condemn their holder as a heretic. Moreover, he sees the prophets and many of the rabbinic sages as holding the same views and not revealing these matters explicitly for the same reason, while at the same time they laid down severe limitations regarding to whom and how they were to be revealed. Certainly to maintain that prophecy and providence are completely naturalistic phenomena and God is neither directly involved in history nor acquainted with any of the individual's deeds—assuming that these are Maimonides' esoteric views—would lead them to throw off the yoke of Judaism, rather than continue to be loyal to Judaism as the most conducive social path in the striving for human perfection, and thus should be adhered to for its inherent worth. Esotericism was the way for Maimonides to signal his agreement with the Aristotelian philosophic worldview without undermining the faith of the masses. In short, it serves as a substitute for philosophic allegories, as well as Maimonides' way of guiding the reader to the explanation of those allegories that he sees in the Bible and in many of the rabbinic homilies. Only on issues that Maimonides feels he can publicly proclaim his philosophic doctrine without undermining the faith of the masses does he do so, most notably, regarding the incorporeality of God.¹³⁹ In other cases he *explicitly* tries to steer his readers to a position closer to that of the philosophers, such as in his treatments of divine governance of the world and prophecy, while still leaving some room for the personal God of tradition.

There have been a number of attempts in our own time to maintain that there is indeed an esoteric level to the *Guide*, but it should be understood along different lines. Maimonides himself, it has been pointed out, in his introduction to the *Guide* advances another reason why certain subjects cannot be taught explicitly:

Know that whenever one of the perfect wishes to mention, either orally or in writing, something that he understands of these secrets, according to the degree of his perfection, he is unable to explain with

139 For a discussion of this issue, see Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 189-223.

complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended, as he could do with other sciences whose teaching is generally recognized. Rather there will befall him when teaching another that which he had undergone when learning himself. I mean to say the subject matter will appear, flash, and then be hidden again, as though this were the nature of this subject matter, be there much or little of it. For this reason, all the Sages possessing knowledge of God the Lord, knowers of the truth, when they aimed at teaching something of this subject matter, spoke of it only in parables and riddles. (*Guide* 1.introduction: 8)

Maimonides appears to be arguing that language by essence is incapable of conveying profound metaphysical truths.¹⁴⁰ These truths come to an individual in “flashes” and can be conveyed only in a similar manner, because discursive descriptions are essentially inadequate to express them. The ramifications of this view for Maimonides’ philosophy of language are profound.¹⁴¹ He may well be interpreted as positing a level of thought that is beyond language, just as God presumably does not think in words.¹⁴² Images in fact may be more conducive to convey the knowledge that lies beyond discursive thought, but only to the one who has attained the requisite philosophic background.

While I am in agreement with the view that Maimonides accepted a level of knowledge beyond discursive knowledge, and this is the level of prophetic illumination,¹⁴³ I do not see the methodology of introducing deliberate contradictions and scattered hints as involving

140 See Moshe Halbertal’s discussion of the second approach to Maimonides’ esotericism in *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and Its Philosophical Implications* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

141 For a study of Maimonides’ philosophy of language and its implications for his philosophy, see Josef Stern, “Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language,” in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, ed. Richard S. Cohen and Hillel Levine (Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), 173-226.

142 See Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish philosophy*, 622-625.

143 Thus the parable form may serve the dual function of both transmitting such knowledge to one with the proper philosophic training and concealing certain truths from the masses. Furthermore, the emanation to the prophet’s imagination may have enabled this individual to grasp certain matters that the intellect alone may have been incapable of grasping. See *ibid.*, 255-257.

this type of esotericism.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, the few parables Maimonides brings in the *Guide* serve as a pedagogical aid, for he himself goes on to explain them, including the parable of the lightning flashes. On most of the issues where he appears to hide his true views, discursive descriptions are in fact the appropriate means for conveying knowledge, whether it be the issue of creation, prophecy, or providence. The knowledge that cannot be adequately attained or conveyed involves, in my view, grasping the essence of incorporeal substance. In the *Guide*, Maimonides is not attempting to impart this knowledge, only the philosophic road to attain it, the issues surrounding it, and its relation to the texts of Jewish tradition.

Another possible reason that has been advanced for Maimonides' esotericism revolves around his skepticism to attain knowledge in certain areas. Maimonides' secret is that he has no final answer to certain fundamental issues.¹⁴⁵ In other words, this approach comes to negate the view that Maimonides' esotericism conceals his agreement with the Aristotelian philosophers on the weighty questions with which he deals. It posits instead that the secret Maimonides wishes to hide is the fact that he does not accept any definite conclusions on these profound issues; at best he can only explore possible alternatives and see to what conclusions they lead. Maimonides does not want his less astute readers to discern that neither philosophy nor religion transmit definite conclusions that should be held as absolute theoretical truth. In this view, uncertainty can be even more problematic and unsettling to Maimonides' readers than his upholding the God of Aristotle.

144 Admittedly, Maimonides draws a parallel between his "flashing" truths in profound matters to his readers and the type of truth that only comes to an individual in "flashes." One, however, is hard put to find an example of his doing this in the *Guide*. One may interpret him as indicating that a similarity exists between his presentation and the presentation in parable form of those that attempted to relay this type of truth in biblical and rabbinic times, not that this is the reason for his own esoteric writing. One should note that when Maimonides indicates that such a "flash" occurred to him (see *Guide* 3.22: 488; cf. 3.51: 624), it involves understanding how to interpret Scripture on the issue of providence and he presents the interpretation in a completely explicit manner.

145 See Yair Loberbaum, "On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics and Esotericism in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Metaphysics* 55 (2002): 711-750.

It appears to me that this approach is more reflective of the contemporary *geist* than Maimonides' intent. One major problem with this approach is that Maimonides gives *explicit* expression to our inability to reach demonstrative conclusions on a range of subjects belonging to the "secrets of the Torah." He certainly does not hide his stance that we can only produce dialectical arguments for deciding many metaphysical questions and even those that belong to the natural sciences, hence our conclusions must be regarded as tentative.¹⁴⁶ Of certain matters, we have no knowledge at all and can never have such knowledge, such as positive knowledge of God's essence; we can only know what God is not and God's actions—i.e., the order of nature. With Aristotle, however, he still agrees that one should favor certain views over others—namely, those supported by the strongest arguments and subject to minimal objections.¹⁴⁷ This point is most clearly exemplified by his discussion of creation, even if the apparent conclusion he reaches is opposed to that of Aristotle. While any conclusion based on dialectical premises is in principle capable of being negated, this does not mean that we should not accept it as true, even if a question mark remains.

There are those who have seen Maimonides' philosophic skepticism as more fundamental and extending to the *possibility of knowing* anything metaphysical, or even many matters relating to the heavenly bodies, and this is the view underlying the esoteric level of his writings. It has been further argued that Maimonides maintains that we have no demonstrative proof for God's very existence, and some of the contradictions in the *Guide* revolve around this issue.¹⁴⁸ This conclusion regarding Maimonides' philosophical skepticism, in turn, is extremely

146 See *Guide* 1.31; 1.33.

147 *Ibid.*, 2.23.

148 At the end of *Guide* 2.24, Maimonides writes a very problematic sentence that may be interpreted as indicating that the existence of God cannot even be proven by us from the heavens—a view that stands in stark contradiction to his previous statements on the subject. Most of *Aleph* 8 (2008) is devoted to an in-depth investigation of this chapter and its problematic sentence on the part of many leading Maimonidean scholars, including Herbert Davison, Alfred Ivry, Josef Stern, Gad Freudenthal, Joel Kraemer, Y. Tzvi Langermann and Warren Z. Harvey.

significant for his theory of human perfection and immortality. If immortality, as Alfarabi sees it, followed by Maimonides, can only be attained with the grasping of the essence of the Active Intellect, and this knowledge, or even lower levels of knowledge, is absolutely impossible for even the perfect individual, then immortality for anyone in any form is also impossible—a conclusion that Alfarabi himself reached. The engagement with philosophy may still be seen as providing the human being with extreme pleasure during his lifetime and is certainly one of the noblest of human activities, but ultimately it serves as preparation for engaging in political activity in the best possible manner. The only life we have is this life, and the philosopher's task is to apply his understanding to perfecting society. This may be seen as Maimonides' ultimate esoteric message, and it finds its most important expression at the very end of the *Guide*, where Maimonides appears to posit political perfection as standing above intellectual perfection.¹⁴⁹ In short, according to this view, two levels of esotericism exist in the *Guide*, one aimed at hiding the truths from the masses for religious-political reasons, and one aimed at hiding the truth from the Aristotelian philosophers and masses alike, since it undermines belief in immortality shared by all, the philosophic view that intellectual perfection is the road to attain it, and thus much of the value of philosophic speculation, which in fact is very limited in the extent of the knowledge that it can impart to us once we embark on a study of the heavens and beyond.

This is not the place to analyze the evidence for and against this view, which has been done by a number of leading scholars.¹⁵⁰ In general, it appears to me to stand in stark opposition to Maimonides' educational and speculative philosophy as I understand it. Maimonides, even in his legal writings, constantly encourages the wise to reach the stage in which they master the natural and divine sciences to the

149 This essentially is the position taken by Shlomo Pines, with his article "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides" serving as the foundation for upholding this approach. Herbert Davidson directly, and Alexander Altmann indirectly, sought to negate Pines's view in this matter, as well as the consequence that Maimonides rejected any form of immortality. See the articles cited above, n. 60. See also Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 141-148.

150 See the previous two notes.

extent of human capacity, and he consistently ties this knowledge with human perfection?¹⁵¹ According to the conclusion that Maimonides embraces philosophical skepticism, this activity may provide an intellectually satisfying pastime but appears to contribute little if anything to one's perfection and certainly nothing to attaining immortality. At the same time the study of Aristotelian philosophy poses dangers to one's commitment to tradition, a commitment that remains for Maimonides politically crucial, no matter how you interpret him. Moreover, it is Maimonides himself who encourages his readers to study Aristotelian philosophy, as evidenced by the dedicatory letter accompanying the *Guide* as well as many statements in the *Guide* itself, while knowing all too well that this study will inevitably lead to perplexity regarding religious teachings. As we have seen, the *Guide*, whose avowed purpose is to solve the perplexity that confronts one when one begins to learn Aristotelian philosophy in light of the teachings of Jewish tradition, proved to be the catalyst for learning philosophy among its readers in Provence, and I would argue that they accurately understood its message. Yet why would Maimonides encourage the wise to engage in such study and become *religiously* perplexed by philosophic teachings if the final message is that there is no chance of ever escaping *philosophical* perplexity? Is the Maimonides of the *Guide* in fact an individual whose final view on all profound issues is one's inability to know the truth at all, or at best remain with a question mark regarding diametrically opposed possibilities with no way of militating between them?

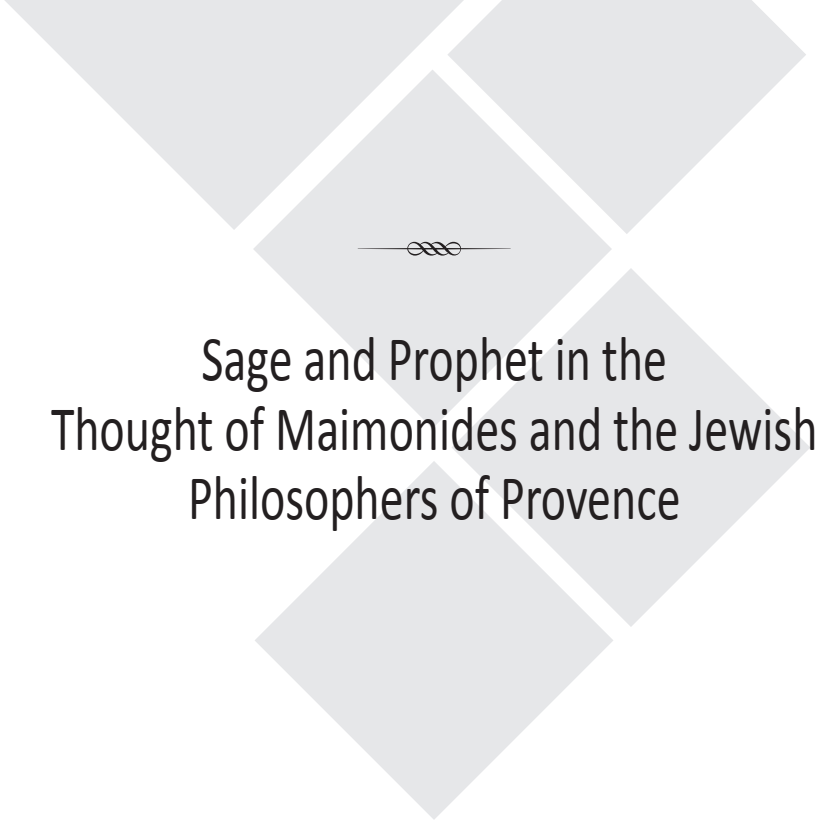
In conclusion, given our own intellectual climate, there is a certain affinity many modern readers may have for the position that Maimonides' esotericism stems from epistemological considerations rather than religious (or political) ones. Without denying that Maimonides' epistemological views raise a number of profound problems, I see little basis for the claim that a desire for the concealment of his embrace of philosophical skepticism underlies them. Given the far disparate interpretations of Maimonides' *Guide* over the ages, one may be excused for

151 See, for example, his introduction to the *Commentary on the Mishnah; Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 4.8; *Guide* 3.27: 51.

looking upon it as an open book, with the reader, as the deconstructionists would argue, creating the text. Maimonides, in his instruction to the readers of his treatise in the introduction of his work, is well aware how differently his treatise will be interpreted by them. Yet he also wants the astute reader to arrive at the meaning *he himself intends*, in order “to liberate that virtuous one from that unto which he has sunk, and I shall guide him in his perplexity until he becomes perfect and he finds rest.”¹⁵² The “rest” to which he refers in my view is not the peace of mind that philosophical skeptics find in their denial of being able to know reality truly as it is with the Bible too incapable of providing definitive answers,¹⁵³ but rather the peace of mind that the Jewish follower of Aristotle finds in the true knowledge of reality and in his understanding how this knowledge stands at the foundation of the biblical text.

152 *Guide* 1.introduction: 16-17.

153 As opposed to what is termed “fideistic skepticism,” which comes in the service of upholding religious doctrines due to the limits of reason.



Sage and Prophet in the Thought of Maimonides and the Jewish Philosophers of Provence

Introduction

After the destruction of the Temple prophecy was taken from the prophets but retained by the sages, we are told in BT Baba Batra 12a. The Talmudic discussion continues by bringing the well-known dictum by Amemar: “The sage is superior to the prophet.”¹ Left unanswered are the crucial questions raised by this dictum and by the discussion preceding it: what exactly is prophecy, what exactly is wisdom, what is the relationship between them, and by extension, what are the characteristics and task of the sage in comparison to those of the prophet?

1 For a survey of approaches to this dictum in the history of Jewish thought, see Alon Goshen-Gottstein, “‘The Sage is Superior to the Prophet’: The Conception of Torah through the Prism of this Proverb through the Ages,” in *Study and Knowledge in Jewish Thought*, volume 2, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2006), 37-77 (Heb.).

Maimonides does not cite Amemar's dictum,² but he addresses the questions it raises extensively in a number of his writings.³ Insofar as Maimonides consistently holds the view that all prophets are also sages, for wisdom is a necessary condition for prophecy,⁴ yet not all sages possess the requisite conditions to be prophets, it would appear that he rejects Amemar's view and regards the prophet as inevitably superior to the sage. In regard to the view ascribing prophecy to non-sages prior to the destruction of the Temple, Maimonides clearly holds the opinion that there never was a period in history in which prophecy, at least true prophecy, was attained by non-sages.⁵ Yet Maimonides' discussions suggest additional perspectives to view this issue, leading one to wonder whether in the final analysis he sees the prophet *qua* prophet as superior to the sage, or whether the prophet's superiority is due solely to the fact that in addition to being a sage he possesses the further (secondary) gift of prophecy. To answer this question, one must explore Maimonides' definition of prophecy and what he sees as the distinct attainment and task of the prophet, in contrast to his definition of wisdom and what he sees as the distinct task of the sage. As we shall see, some of Maimonides' positions raise as many questions as they answer, leaving room for interpreting his views in far disparate ways.

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- 2 It appears in an epistle ascribed to Maimonides and addressed to his disciple, Joseph ben Judah. While David Tzevi Baneth accepts the authenticity of this epistle, Shailat brings a number of arguments against this claim; see Isaac Shailat (ed. and Heb. trans.), *Iggerot HaRambam* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot Press, 1988), 694-695.
 - 3 I have dealt at length with Maimonides' approach to prophecy in my book *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 148-315. Much of my analysis in this chapter is based on what I wrote there.
 - 4 See, for example, *Guide of the Perplexed* 2.32; *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 7.1; *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*, sixth principle; *Eight Chapters*, 7.
 - 5 See *Guide* 2.32. Maimonides notes that diviners are also at times referred to in the Bible as prophets, since the term is used equivocally. At any rate, one should not regard them as true prophets. According to Maimonides' discussion in *Guide* 2.36, in the period of the Exile prophecy ceased for natural reasons, yet he subtly alludes in the *Guide* to the view that this phenomenon continued throughout history, though it did not produce public prophets. See Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 308-311.

It is clear from Maimonides' writings that one type of knowledge that the prophet possesses but the sage lacks is that of divination, a gift that the prophet shares to some degree with non-prophetic diviners.⁶ Insofar as the prophet is also a sage, he shares with non-prophetic sages knowledge of the theoretical sciences—that is to say, knowledge of all the sciences culminating in metaphysics—for it is this knowledge in particular that characterizes the wise in Maimonides' view. It is also this knowledge, as opposed to any other type of knowledge or any other trait, which constitutes the human being's final perfection.⁷ The main question I wish to explore in this chapter is whether Maimonides was of the opinion that the prophet *qua* prophet attains theoretical knowledge that the non-prophetic sage is incapable of attaining, and what is the nature of this knowledge. I would also like to view the public functions of both prophet and sage in Maimonides' thought and how their functions are related to the types of knowledge they attain. This leads to the further question of his view of the relation of the rabbinic sage to the philosophic sage, as well as the question of the authority of the rabbinic sage in comparison to that of the prophet. Finally, I would like to show how Maimonides' followers in Provence treated the relationship between sage and prophet in respect to their attainment of theoretical knowledge.

Maimonides' Approach to Prophecy

Prophecy for Maimonides is a natural perfection. In the *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*, sixth principle of faith, and in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah, 7.1, he defines prophecy as conjunction (*ittiṣāl*) of the intellect with the Active Intellect, which is attained after apprehending all that exists. In the sixth principle, he mentions also the emanation that comes from the latter intellect to the former one when

6 For a discussion of this point, see below.

7 Maimonides maintains this position in his introduction to *Commentary on the Mishnah* and his *Eight Chapters*, reiterates it in several places in his *Mishneh Torah*, most notably in the "Laws of the Principles of the Torah," and presents it throughout the *Guide*. For Maimonides' discussion of different types of wisdom, with knowledge of the sciences being considered wisdom proper, see *Guide* 3.54.

it has reached this state. In *Guide* 2.36, he brings a fuller, though somewhat more cryptic, definition:

Know that the true reality and quiddity of prophecy consist in it being an overflow overflowing from God, may He be cherished and honored, through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty. This is the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species; and this state is the ultimate term of perfection for the imaginative faculty. (369)

Prophecy is defined here in terms of an emanation that is received by two human faculties, the rational and imaginative. Though Maimonides subsequently mentions “conjunction” in dealing with prophetic visions,⁸ he does not introduce this notion in his initial description of prophecy. In the continuation of the chapter, Maimonides sees the emanation from the Active Intellect to these two faculties as resulting in the attainment of two types of knowledge:

Now there is no doubt that whenever, in an individual of this description, his imaginative faculty, which is as perfect as possible, acts and receives from the intellect an overflow corresponding to his speculative perfection, this individual will only apprehend divine and most extraordinary matters, will see only God and His angels, and will only be aware and achieve knowledge of matters that constitute true opinions and general directives for the well-being of men in their relations with one another. (372)

To these two types of knowledge—the apprehension of metaphysics and the principles of ideal leadership—one should add also knowledge of the future, as is clarified in the following two chapters, as well as Maimonides’ other writings.⁹ The emanation from the Active Intellect

8 See *Guide* 2.45; see also Maimonides’ description of conjunction when speaking of the ecstatic death of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam at the end of *Guide* 3.51. Whether Maimonides thought that a form of ontological conjunction with the Active Intellect was in fact possible, and with it the attainment of immortality, has been a source of disagreement among scholars. For a discussion of this issue, see Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides’ Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law and the Human Ideal* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 136-150.

9 See, for example, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Principles of the Torah 10.3.

does not constitute the transmission of actual knowledge in Maimonides' view, but it refers to a force that strengthens the functioning of these two human faculties when they are in a perfect state, thereby allowing the individual to attain knowledge in these various areas on the basis of the knowledge he already possesses.¹⁰ This point is supported by the continuation of Maimonides' discussion, as we shall see below.

In *Guide* 2.37, Maimonides describes three types of emanation that are distinguished solely by the human faculties receiving it and not by the nature of the emanation itself:

The case in which the intellectual overflow overflows only toward the rational faculty and does not overflow at all toward the imaginative faculty—either because the scantiness of what overflows or because of some deficiency existing in the imaginative faculty in its natural disposition, a deficiency that makes it impossible for it to receive the overflow of the intellect—is characteristic of the class of men of science engaged in speculation. If, on the other hand, this overflow reaches both faculties—I mean both the rational and the imaginative—as we and others among the philosophers have explained, and if the imaginative faculty is in a state of ultimate perfection owing to its natural disposition, this is characteristic of the class of prophets. If again the overflow only reaches the imaginative faculty, the defect in the rational faculty deriving either from its original natural disposition or from insufficiency of training, this is characteristic of the class of those who govern cities, while being the legislators, the soothsayers, the augurs, and the dreamers of veridical dreams (374)

It is clear from Maimonides' account that the superior rational faculty of both the prophet and philosopher is the one responsible for their attainment of theoretical knowledge, and the superior imaginative faculty is the one primarily responsible for the ability to govern and divine. If the prophet is a far better leader than the non-prophet in Maimonides' thought, his advantage is undoubtedly due to his superior *rational* faculty. This enables the prophet to govern with the human being's true perfection and felicity in mind, while non-prophets set as their ends false or inferior goals. The prophet's perfect rational faculty

10 For more on this point, see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 239-257.

also accords him an advantage over non-prophets in the area of divination.¹¹ Philosophers due to their imperfect imaginative faculty lack ability in these two areas. This leaves us with the question of whether the prophet is superior to the philosopher in the area of theoretical knowledge, and if so, whether his superior *imaginative* faculty accords him this superiority. Complicating the picture is the fact that Moses in Maimonides' thought achieved the highest level of theoretical knowledge, though his imaginative faculty was not involved at all in the reception of the prophetic emanation.¹²

I have argued in previous studies that Maimonides in fact thought that prophets were superior to philosophers in the realm of theoretical knowledge.¹³ This superiority is due in large part to a superior rational faculty that possesses a greater intuitive ability to quickly frame syllogisms, grasp conclusions, and advance in theoretical knowledge, as though one learns these things instantaneously and without effort, just as the same ability when applied to particular circumstances allows one to divine the future instantaneously. As Maimonides explains in *Guide* 2.38 regarding this faculty:

You will find among people a man whose conjecturing and divination are very strong and habitually hit the mark. . . . The causes of this are many—they are various anterior, posterior, and present circumstances. But in virtue of the strength of this divination, the mind goes over all these premises and draws from them conclusions in the shortest time, so that it is thought to happen in no time at all. In virtue of this faculty, certain people give warnings concerning great future events. . . . Know that the true prophets indubitably grasp speculative matters; by means of his speculation alone, man is unable to grasp the causes from which what a prophet has come to know necessarily follows. This has a counterpart in their giving information regarding matters with respect to which man, using only common conjecture and divination, is unable to give information. For the very overflow that affects the imaginative faculty—with a result of rendering it perfect so that its act brings about its giving

11 I argue this point in more detail in *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 83-87; see also below.

12 See *Guide* 2.45. For more on this issue, see below, chapter 9, 316 n. 2.

13 See *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 77-79, 292-293; *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 255-257.

information about what will happen and its apprehending those future events as if they were things that had been perceived by the senses and had reached the imaginative faculty from the senses—is also the overflow that renders perfect the act of the rational faculty, so that its act brings about its knowing things that are real in their existence, and it achieves this apprehension as if it had apprehended it by starting from speculative premises. . . . For the overflow of the Active Intellect goes in its true reality only to it [that is, the rational faculty], causing it to pass from potentiality to actuality. It is from the rational faculty that that overflow comes to the imaginative faculty. How then can the imaginative faculty be perfected in so great a measure as to apprehend what does not come to it from the senses, without the rational faculty being affected in a similar way so as to apprehend without having apprehended by way of premises, inference, and reflection? This is the true reality of the notion of prophecy, and these are the opinions that are peculiar to the prophetic teaching. (376-377)

The process of divination Maimonides describes appears to be a *rational* process. Syllogisms are rapidly formed on the basis of the individual's knowledge. Conclusions involving the future are then drawn. Maimonides sees a similar process at work in the attainment of theoretical knowledge. The very term that Maimonides uses for “conjecture” and “intuition” in the area of divination, *al-ḥads*, is the term employed by Avicenna and other the Islamic philosophers for the ability possessed by certain individuals for quickly attaining *intelligibles*. In the part of his encyclopedia *Al-Najāt* devoted to an exploration of the powers of the soul, Avicenna writes regarding the prophetic faculty:

If a person can acquire knowledge from within himself, this strong capacity is called “intuition” (*al-ḥads*). It is so strong in certain people that they do not need great effort, or instruction and actualization, in order to make contact with the active intelligence. But the primary capacity of such a person for this is so powerful that he might also be said to possess the second capacity; indeed, it seems as though he knows everything from within himself. This is the highest degree of this capacity. In this state the material intelligence must be called “Divine Spirit.” It belongs to the genus of *intellectus in habitu*, but is so lofty that not all people share it. It is not unlikely, indeed, that some of these actions attributed to the “Divine Intelligence” because

of their powerful and lofty nature overflow into the imagination which symbolizes them in sense-imagery and words in the way which we have previously indicated. What proves this is the evident fact that the intelligible truths are acquired only when the middle term of a syllogism is obtained. This may be done in two ways: sometimes through intuition, which is an act of mind by which the mind itself immediately perceived the middle term. This power of intuition is quickness of apprehension. . . . It is possible that a man may find the truth within himself, and that the syllogism may be effected in his mind without any teacher. This varies both quantitatively and qualitatively. . . . Thus there might be a man whose soul has such an intense purity and is so firmly linked to the rational principles that he blazes with intuition, i.e. with the receptivity of inspiration coming from the active intelligence concerning everything. So the forms of all things contained in the active intelligence are imprinted on his soul either all at once or nearly so, not that he accepts them merely on authority but on account of their logical order which encompasses all the middle terms. . . . This is a kind of prophetic inspiration, indeed its highest form and the one most fitted to be called Divine Power; and it is the highest human faculty.¹⁴

When Maimonides writes that “premises, inference, and reflection” are not involved in the apprehension of the prophet, he should not be interpreted as maintaining that the prophet knows only conclusions without the syllogisms that underlie them, for this is not considered true knowledge at all in the philosophic tradition; rather, he has in mind Avicenna’s approach that this process happens instantaneously in the prophetic intellect.¹⁵

14 Fazlur Rahman (trans.), *Avicenna’s Psychology* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 35-37. For the Arabic text of the parallel discussion in Avicenna’s encyclopedia *Al-Shifā’*, see Fazlur Rahman (ed.), *Avicenna’s De Anima* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 250-252. For a discussion of *al-ḥads* in Avicenna, see Dmitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988), 159-176.

15 Prior to Maimonides, Judah Halevi cites this view of the prophetic intellect in *Kuzari* 5.12. Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera, one of the earliest commentators of Maimonides, indicates the relation between Maimonides’ view and that of Avicenna in his commentary on *Guide* 1.34. See his *Moreh ha-Moreh*, ed. Yair Shiffman (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2001), 137. Maimonides mentions *al-ḥads* as a virtue of the rational faculty in *Eight Chapters* 2, indicating that he was well aware of the philosophic tradition connecting this power with the attainment of theoretical knowledge. While in the passage from the *Guide* cited above Maimonides clearly implies that a rational process is involved in divination, he may have decided

Maimonides' view of the superiority of the prophet's rational faculty to that of the philosopher emerges from the parable of the lightning flashes that he brings at the beginning of the *Guide*:

We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day. That is the degree of the great one among the prophets. . . . Among them there is one to whom the lightning flashes only once in the whole of his night. . . . There are others between whose lightning flashes there are greater or shorter intervals. Thereafter comes he who does not attain a degree in which his darkness is illumined by any lightning flash. It is illumined, however, by a polished body or something of that kind. . . . And even this small light that shines over us is not always there, but flashes and is hidden again. . . . It is in accord with these states that the degrees of the perfect vary. (7-8)

The one who can "see" the truths of metaphysics directly is the prophet. Prophecy thus is equated with a special type of intellectual illumination, by means of which the individual apprehends the highest level of reality. Different degrees of prophecy exist in accordance with the number of times the intellect experiences this type of illumination. Each "lightning flash" brings in its wake a more penetrating grasp of metaphysical reality. Moses represents the final point of the continuum of perfection. His intellect was in a state of continuous illumination. Nevertheless, he remains in some crucial sense a corporeal being. He does not see metaphysical reality in the bright light of the sun.

not to use the term *al-hads* in regard to the attainment of intelligibles as well, in order not to make this point too explicit. Instead, he allows his less astute readers to draw the conclusion that this power of intuition is tied up only with the imagination, preventing them from attributing a superior rational faculty to diviners, even if only in regard to practical matters, which would blur the distinction between the three classes that Maimonides wishes to draw. The difference in his terminology from that of Avicenna thus does not reflect a different attitude; rather, it is due to the other issues that inform his discussion. For a different approach to this issue, see Amira Eran, "Intuition and Inspiration: The Causes of Jewish Thinkers' Objection to Avicenna's Intellectual Prophecy (*Hads*)," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007): 39-71.

The next group Maimonides describes consists of those who see metaphysical reality by way of reflection. They are the philosophers. Maimonides does not explain the nature of the difference between prophets and philosophers. While in his later discussion in the *Guide* the difference between the two lies in how quickly and high one can climb in one's attainment of discursive knowledge, the images he uses in this passage suggest that the difference does not lie so much in "what" they know, though this too enters into the picture, as in the quality or clarity of their apprehension. The prophet is able to understand metaphysical reality in a more profound, holistic manner. This point is also suggested by the other famous parable brought by Maimonides in the *Guide* (3.51), that of the king in his palace. The men of science are those who have entered the inner court of the palace, by virtue of achieving perfection in the natural things, and understanding the divine science, while the prophets are those who, "after having attained perfection in the divine science, turn wholly toward God, may He be cherished and held sublime, renounce what is other than He, and direct all their acts of their intellect toward an examination of the beings with a view to drawing from them proof with regard to Him, so as to know His governance of them in whatever way it is possible. These people are those who are present in the ruler's council. This is the rank of the prophets" (620). The emphasis here too is on the completeness of the knowledge one attains in this stage—the ability to see the whole picture in all its details of the interrelation of all the existents with God.¹⁶

These parables and their explanations, as well as Maimonides' approach to Moses' apprehension in other passages of his writings, read

16 Compare Maimonides' description of the knowledge attained by Moses in the revelation at Sinai when he was on top of the mountain (in the cleft of the rock), depicted in Exodus 33-34: "This dictum—*all my goodness*—alludes to the display to him of all existing things. . . . By their display, I mean that he will apprehend their nature and the way they are mutually connected so that he will know how He governs them in general and in detail" (*Guide* 1.54: 124).

like a less mystical version of Avicenna's account in his *Remarks and Admonitions*.¹⁷

Furthermore, if the will and spiritual exercise bring the knower to a certain limit, he will encounter pleasurable stolen looks at the light of the Truth, as if these looks are lightning that shines over the knower and then turns away from him. . . . He is then absorbed in those overwhelming moments until they overcome him even while not exercising. Thus whenever he catches a glimpse of a thing, he returns from that thing to the side of sanctity, remembering something of the latter. He is then overcome by a fainting spell. Thus he sees the Truth in everything. Perhaps on his way to this limit, his veils are lifted up from him, and he ceases to be calm. . . . After that, spiritual exercise carries him to a point at which his moment is converted into tranquility. Thus that which is stolen becomes familiar, and the lightning becomes a clear flame. He acquires a stable knowledge of the Truth, as if this knowledge is a continuous accompaniment in which he delights in the rapture of the Truth. If he turns away from this he will do so with loss and regret. . . . Perhaps up to this point, this knowledge is facilitated for him only at times. But then he moves gradually until he attains it whenever he wishes. . . . Knowledge begins by the truly adept's separation, detachment, abandonment, and rejection—concentrating on a togetherness that is the togetherness of the attributes of the Truth, reaching the One, and then stopping.¹⁸

The focus in both Maimonides' and Avicenna's accounts is on the state of the *intellect*, though they resort to figurative language in attempt to depict this state. Yet the superiority of the prophet's intellectual attainment in Maimonides' view may also be due in part to his superior imagination, and not only to his superior rational faculty. The imaginative faculty of the prophet clearly serves as a crucial pedagogical aid in

17 For Maimonides' immediate sources for the parable of lightning flashes, see Shlomo Pines, "The Philosophic Sources of *The Guide of the Perplexed*," *ci*, found in his translation of the treatise. Pines, however, questions whether Avicenna was Maimonides' immediate source and traces the parable to Ibn Bajja instead, whose works were well known to Maimonides; see *ibid.*, *civ-cvi*. On Ibn Bajja's approach, see Alexander Altmann, "Ibn Bajja on Man's Ultimate Felicity," in *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (London: Routledge, 1969), 73-107.

18 Shams Inati (trans.), *Ibn Sina and Mysticism—Remarks and Admonitions: Part Four* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 86-88.

teaching others theoretical truths by representing them in images, but may also aid the prophet himself to grasp the truths in the realm of metaphysics in a more unified manner.¹⁹ Only Moses, whose initial prophecy also involved the imagination in Maimonides' view,²⁰ was able to reach the level where he could dispense with its services in his reception of the prophetic emanation and comprehend metaphysical reality as pure intellect, similar to the comprehension of the Active Intellect.

The conclusion one apparently draws from this analysis is that in any conflict between the prophet and philosopher in theoretical matters one should favor the prophet due to his superior knowledge. Yet this conclusion is far from certain, insofar as the prophet may often teach opinions that are necessary for political reasons, and not because of their theoretical truth, as Maimonides indicates in regard to the teachings of the Torah itself.²¹ Moreover, it is not at all clear that Maimonides thought that the prophet is inevitably infallible in his theoretical knowledge, a point that emerged from the discussion in the previous chapter.²² In short, Maimonides may well have believed that the prophet attains greater intellectual perfection than the philosopher, and a greater clarity in his understanding of metaphysics, but this does not necessitate the view that the opinions the prophet expresses should inevitably be accepted as theoretical truth. God's creation of the world, for example, is one of the fundamental opinions that should be accepted on the basis of prophetic teachings, according to Maimonides,²³ while at

19 It is interesting to note that Avicenna too, in his *Remarks and Admonitions*, deals with the imaginative aspect of the knowledge attained by the Knower or prophet, after dealing with the intellectual aspect. He writes: "Hence, the soul is easily pulled to the higher side. If a representation of an invisible thing occurs to the soul, the imagination turns toward this representation, and receives it as well. This turning is due either to a stimulus given by this occurring thing when the imagination is quick to discern this stimulus after having rested its movement and relieved its weakness, or to the rational soul's natural employment of the imagination, for the imagination assists the soul when such opportunities are presented" (100).

20 See below, chapter 9, 323-324.

21 See *Guide* 3.28.

22 See above, chapter 7, 249-250.

23 See *Guide* 2.23. Interestingly, in *Guide* 2.13, Maimonides indicates that Abraham was led to this belief by speculation (and not prophecy). The depiction of Abraham

the same time there are good reasons to interpret him as regarding this as a necessary belief, rather than a true one, as we have seen above in chapter three. Furthermore, given the nature of prophetic speech, the views of the philosophers remain the key for understanding the theoretical ideas the prophets convey.

The Public Roles of the Prophet and the Sage in Maimonides' Thought and Their Legal Authority

The superiority of the prophet over the philosopher in theoretical matters, over the non-prophetic leader in governance, and over the diviner in foretelling the future certainly qualifies him as the philosopher-king *par excellence*. The image of the prophet in the *Guide* is in fact that of the ideal leader, though the role of transmitter of a divine law is expressly limited to Moses.²⁴ When one turns, however, to Maimonides' legal writings, his position on the public role of the prophet is more complex and not without dissonance. In these writings, the prophet's role does not appear to be at all commensurate with his attainment.

A striking example of this dissonance can be found in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Principles of the Torah. In chapters 7-10, Maimonides deals with the issues of the nature of prophecy, Mosaic prophecy, the verification of prophecy, and the authority of the prophet. He begins his account by stressing the exceptional wisdom of the prophet, his moral traits, his complete knowledge of the natural sciences and metaphysics (or *pardes* in accordance with Maimonides' definition of this term in the first four chapters of this section), and his complete single-minded devotion solely to the apprehension of these matters. These qualifications result in his conjunction with the Active Intellect and becoming in essence a "different person"—a reference to his attainment of the immortal acquired intellect (7.1).²⁵ Maimonides' depiction

is an anti-Aristotelian philosopher stands in contrast to Maimonides' previous depiction of Abraham in the *Mishneh Torah* as a philosopher who proved the existence of God on the basis of the Aristotelian notion of the eternity of the world.

24 See *Guide* 2.39-40.

25 See my *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 137-139. For an analysis of Maimonides' discussion of prophecy in the "Laws of the Principles of the Torah," see *Prophecy*:

of prophecy in this context is completely in terms of its intellectual dimension. He goes on to maintain that there are different levels of prophecy, just as in the case of wisdom (7.2), refers to the imaginative dimension of prophecy, insofar as it takes place in a vision (7.3), lists the differences between normative prophecy and Mosaic prophecy (7.6), and indicates that prophecy may be either of a private nature (that is, meant only for the recipient), or public (that is, involving a mission to others). In the latter case, the task of the prophets are to teach others wisdom, inform them what they should do and prevent them from practicing evil (7.7)—appropriate tasks, given the prophet's own qualifications and attainment. Maimonides in this manner distinguishes between the phenomenon of prophecy and the prophetic mission, which is integral to only some prophecies.²⁶

Maimonides' approach to the verification of prophecy follows from the nature of prophecy and the prophet's qualifications. Individuals lacking sterling moral characteristics and perfect wisdom (which primarily denotes knowledge of all the natural sciences and metaphysics), cannot be prophets. The claim to prophecy on the part of anyone of this description thus is automatically dismissed (7.7). It is only at the final stage that the prophet is asked to produce a sign—not necessarily a miracle, but the accurate foretelling of future events in all their details without error (10.1-2). Implicit in this test is the view that since divination is one of the components of prophecy, the lack of this ability indicates that one is not a true prophet.

Till this point, Maimonides' approach is consistent from a rational perspective. Yet the continuation of his discussion is surprising, for Maimonides not only sees divination as a component of prophecy; he treats it as the primary one, at least of public prophecy: "The prophet does not arise for us except to inform us of future events in the world" (10.3). One would have expected Maimonides to elaborate upon the other tasks that he ascribed to the prophet earlier in his discussion that is to say, as a teacher of wisdom and a guide to the proper course of

The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy, 182-201.

26 On Maimonides' naturalistic approach to the prophetic mission, see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 251-253.

public action—which follow from the prophet’s exceptional intellectual accomplishments and leadership abilities.²⁷ Instead, he transforms the prophet *qua* prophet essentially into a glorified diviner.

The aim of Maimonides’ approach appears to be a minimization of the public role of the prophet at the same time that he maximizes the nature of his attainment. The prophet is the one who achieves ultimate human perfection and an immortal intellect, yet he is not granted all the authority that his achievement appears to warrant. Maimonides is adamant on the point that prophecy does not involve adding laws to the Torah or annulling them, changing their details, or even deciding questions of law on the basis of revelation (9.1, 4). In short, the authority of the prophet extends only to matters that the Law does not command or prohibit, such as waging or not waging war, building or not building a wall, etc. (9.2). It is easy to see how these matters are tied up with the ability of the prophet to predict the future. The question that this view raises is why the prophet does not have authority in the other areas that are tied up with his superior intellect, such as determining laws or commanding the theoretical truths that are to be held by the nation in addition to those decreed by Moses.

The reason Maimonides argues for the eternal uniqueness of Mosaic Law, and hence the inability of the prophet to make any changes in it whatsoever, can easily be traced in large measure to his desire to erect a strong bulwark against the annulment of the Law by those he considers to be false prophets, such as the founders of the other religions. Even recognizing *permanent* minor changes in Mosaic Law can open the door to its complete abrogation.²⁸ Yet the prophet *qua* prophet would

27 Both these roles are stressed in Maimonides’ discussion of prophecy in the *Guide*, though he does not contradict there what he had written in the *Mishneh Torah*.

28 See, for example, what Maimonides says regarding the issue of changes in the Law in *Guide* 3.34. Not all of Maimonides’ predecessors agreed with the view that prophets after Moses lacked all legislative authority. For more on the issues discussed here and the relevant bibliography, see Howard Kreisel, “Maimonides’ Political Philosophy,” in *Cambridge Companion to Moses Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 193-220; idem, “Prophetic Authority in the Philosophy of Spinoza and in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” in *Spiritual Authority: Struggles over Cultural Power in Jewish Thought*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Boaz Huss, and Uri Ehrlich (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the

appear to be the jurist *par excellence*, so it is perplexing why Maimonides is insistent on barring him even from this role.²⁹ It may be countered that he denies him this role as a prophet, but not as a sage, for the prophet is also a sage. While this is certainly the case, the point remains that Maimonides insists that the prophet has no advantage over non-prophetic sages in deciding laws, despite his evident advantages over them. Consider, for example, Maimonides' extreme formulations of this position in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*:

Know that prophecy does not apply to speculations concerning the [legal] commentary on the Law, and the derivation of "branches" by way of the thirteen principles [of legal hermeneutics]. What Joshua and Pinchas achieved by way of speculation and [legal] syllogism is precisely what Rabina and R. Ashi achieved.³⁰

If a thousand prophets, all like Elijah and Elisha, interpret [the law] according to a certain interpretation and a thousand and one sages offer an opposing interpretation, 'one must follow the majority. The law is in accordance with the words of the thousand and one sages, not the thousand great prophets.³¹

Given Maimonides' approach to prophecy, it is hard to argue that he is simply favoring intellect over revelation in this case. No one is better suited *intellectually* to decide cases of law than the prophet, so why should his *prophetic* insight of the ideal decision to be made in any given matter not be favored over the one who lacks this attainment? Why should we only accord the prophet this authority when it comes to political decisions, due primarily to his superior divinatory ability,

Negev Press, 2009), 207-221 (Heb.). See also Gerald Blidstein, "On the Institutionalization of Prophecy in Maimonidean Halakhah," *Daat* 43 (1999): 25-42 (Heb.).

29 It should be noted that the prophet *qua* prophet shares some of the same areas of legal authority as the sages—the ability to institute legal enactments for the public as well as to *temporarily* suspend Mosaic commandments. Maimonides does not break with his rabbinic sources on this point, but clearly is more interested in this context to stress the limits of prophetic authority rather than its prerogatives.

30 See Isaac Shailat (ed. and Heb. trans.), *Haqdamot HaRambam la-Mishnah* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1992), 29 (Arabic, 329).

31 *Ibid.*, 36 (Arabic, 335).

and not accord him a similar authority in purely legal matters due to his superior intellectual ability to guide society to the most appropriate path? Is not the prophet the individual who best understands the aims of the divine Lawgiver and can best determine the most appropriate legal rulings in light of the particular historical circumstances of his period? This is precisely the model advanced by Alfarabi, which had such a strong impact on Maimonides' thought and to an important degree even his own legal activity.³²

Moreover, Maimonides appears to maintain the position that just as there is an ideal law which finds its expression in the Torah of Moses, there are also ideal legal rulings. Evidence for this view can be found in his explanation of the reason for the controversies among the Sages, which he brings in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*:

Regarding their saying: "When the students of Shammai and Hillel grew more numerous and did not attend to them [their masters] in an adequate manner, the controversies in Israel grew more numerous" [BT Sanhedrin 88b], this matter is exceptionally clear. When two individuals are equal in discernment, speculation, and knowledge of the principles from which one deduces [legal opinions], no disagreement at all will arise between them in their logical deductions, and if it arises, it will be rare. One finds this in the case of Shammai and Hillel, who disagreed only on a few legal rulings. This is due to the fact that the logical deductions of each of them in all [legal] matters that are attained by logical deduction were close to one another. Similarly, the principles that were transmitted to one were the same as the principles transmitted to the other. However, when the diligence of their students declined and their [power of] logical deduction weakened in comparison to that of Hillel and Shammai, their masters, disagreements arose among them in many matters upon which they speculated. The logical deductions of each of them were commensurate with one's intellect and the principles one held. One should not blame them for this. We do not demand of two sages who argue that they argue with the intellect of Joshua and Pinchas. Similarly, we cast no doubts regarding the matter on which they disagreed, insofar as they were not like Shammai and Hillel, or those greater than them, for God did not command us thus in the service of Him.³³

32 See Maimonides' *Political Thought*, 16-27.

33 That is to say, we do not question the final decision of the sages who disagreed with one another and who were inferior to their masters, for God did not command us

Rather, He obligated us to heed the sages of any given generation, as it is said: *To the judge that will be in those days and you shall inquire* etc. [Deuteronomy 17:9]. This is the manner in which controversies arose, not that they were mistaken in the traditions they received, one receiving a true one and the other a false.³⁴

According to Maimonides' approach, a less than perfect wisdom is what brings to weak logical reasoning and controversies in matters of law. From this one can infer that one of perfect wisdom can deduce the ideal legal rulings.

While the principles to which Maimonides refers may be thought of only as formal legal ones, such as R. Ishmael's thirteen principles by which the Torah is expounded—and hence deriving the ideal ruling is based purely on formal legal reasoning—there is good reason to posit that Maimonides has additional principles in mind, such as the final ends of the Law. In other words, meta-legal principles are crucial in deducing the best legal ruling in a given situation. This approach fits in nicely with the Platonic model of the philosopher-king who creates an ideal society by means of the laws he lays down and the opinions that he teaches. Alfarabi, building upon this model, posited successive (or simultaneous) ideal legislations laid down on the basis of the revelation (*wahy*) attained by different supreme lawgivers, each law framed in accordance with the circumstances of one's period and one's society. Those rulers who were not on the level of the supreme lawgivers, insofar as they did not possess all the requisite qualifications to attain revelation, were to lead society on the basis of the older ideal legislation.³⁵ How they were to do so can be discerned from Alfarabi's discussion of jurisprudence and theology in his *Enumeration of the Sciences*:

Jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is the art that enables man to infer the determination of whatever was not explicitly specified by the Lawgiver, on the basis of such things as were explicitly specified and determined

to heed only the decisions of the great sages and not the lesser ones.

34 *Haqdamot HaRambam la-Mishnah*, 41 (Arabic, 339-340).

35 See Alfarabi, *The Political Regime*, trans. Fauzi Najjar, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, ed. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972), 37.

by him; and to strive to infer correctly by taking into account the Lawgiver's purpose with the religion he had legislated for the nation to which he gave that religion. Now every religion comprises certain opinions and certain actions. Examples of the opinions are those legislated about God (praise be to Him) and His attributes, about the world, and so forth. Examples of the actions are those by which God (the Mighty and Majestic) is magnified, and the actions by means of which transactions are conducted in the cities. For this reason, the science of jurisprudence has two parts, one part dealing with the opinions and another dealing with the actions.

The art of dialectical theology (*kalām*) is a positive disposition that enables man to argue in the defense of the specific opinions and actions stated by the founder of the religion, and against everything that opposes these opinions and actions. This art is also divided into two parts; one part deals with the opinions, and another deals with the actions. It is different from jurisprudence. For the jurist takes the opinions and the actions stated explicitly by the founder of the religion and, using them as axioms, he infers the things that follow from them as consequences. The dialectical theologian, on the other hand, defends the things that the jurist uses as axioms, without inferring other things from them. If it should happen that a certain man possesses the ability to do both, then he is both a jurist and a dialectical theologian. He defends the axioms in his capacity as a dialectical theologian, and he infers from them in his capacity as a jurist.³⁶

According to Alfarabi's approach, the task of those who are not supreme lawgivers is to defend the opinions of the ideal law against those who reject them, and to interpret the law in a manner appropriate to situations not explicitly addressed by it. As in the case of Maimonides, one may argue that Alfarabi too sees the jurists as interpreting the ideal law solely on the basis of the established formal rules. Yet Alfarabi explicitly states that the jurists take "into account the Lawgiver's purpose with the religion he had legislated," thereby implying that they act also in accordance with the spirit of the ideal law in order that it achieves the purpose for which it was promulgated.

Maimonides, who rejected the possibility of any ideal legislation other than Mosaic Law, regarded the Sages of the Talmud, at least the most important of them, as jurists-theologians who were steeped in

36 Alfarabi, *The Enumeration of the Sciences*, trans. Fauzi Najjar, in *Medieval Political Philosophy*, 27.

philosophy. They were able to interpret the Torah, both the actions it commands and the opinions it imparts, in accordance with its final purpose—the welfare of the soul (that is to say, intellect), and the welfare of the body (that is, the body politic)—and in a manner most appropriate for the social circumstances of their period. The ideal rulings are those that best accomplish this task while still conforming to the formal principles of legal reasoning. In essence, ideal legal rulings are the ones that the Lawgiver would have ruled if confronted with a similar situation. Maimonides appears to have viewed his own task in this light, both as a public educator and as a legal authority.³⁷

Hence Maimonides' preference for the decision of a thousand and one non-prophetic sages over that of a thousand prophets is due to the importance he attaches to the formal rules of adjudication in cases of disagreements, even if the price to be paid is a non-ideal decision. He saw it as crucial to keep revelation completely out of the process, and insist in no uncertain terms that even those attaining revelation should be granted no formal advantage over those who had not, in order to prevent those claiming revelation from being in a position to undermine the legal process. It would appear that his very real fear of false prophets and the havoc they cause played a major consideration in this approach. Better to preserve the normative legal process of decision making, even if it results in this case in inferior decisions, than to leave the process exposed to such a danger. Prophets can still function as sages and make their impact on the interpretation of the Law felt in that manner. Even in the areas related to determining laws in which Maimonides concedes that they enjoy prerogatives as prophets—i.e., issuing legal enactments or temporarily suspending commandments—their prerogatives do not exceed those enjoyed by the rabbinic Sages. Maimonides seeks to insure that the Law will not be annulled by any authority, whether human or those claiming divine. There was and will always be only one inviolable Divine Law, Maimonides insists, and that is the Law of Moses.

37 See Warren Z. Harvey, "Political Philosophy and Halakhah in Maimonides," *Iyyun* 29 (1980): 198-212 (Heb.).

The historical picture that Maimonides paints in support of this view is one in which even the classical prophets acted as sages in the interpretation of Law. Their exceptional intellectual ability found its expression in enabling them to assume the position of heading the high rabbinical court. In the introduction to *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides indicates that the biblical prophets received and passed on the Oral Law to the next generation not as individuals but as heads of a rabbinical court. Moreover, Maimonides hints that in the Talmudic period there were Sages who attained prophetic status but continued to function as normative rabbinic authorities. The most outstanding example of this trend is R. Judah the Prince, the leader of rabbinic Judaism toward the end of the second century and the compiler of the Mishnah, to whom Maimonides ascribes all the qualifications for prophecy and who served as Maimonides' model for his own activity.³⁸

In my discussion till this point, I have used the term "sage" in what appears to be an equivocal manner. The notion of "sage" in reference to the interpretation of the Law denotes a person whose expertise is Jewish law, whereas the true "sage" in Maimonides' thought is the one who has attained complete knowledge of the sciences culminating in metaphysics—that is to say, the true philosopher. The question immediately arises as to the relation he sees between these two kinds of sages. Indeed, when Maimonides himself speaks of "sage" (*hakham*) and "wisdom" (*hokhmah*), whether he is speaking of the legal sage and legal knowledge or the philosophical sage and philosophical knowledge must be inferred from the context. At times it appears that he even plays on this ambiguity. He certainly depicts as the ideal situation one in which the same individual combines both types of knowledge. This is true for him of the biblical prophets and the greatest Sages of the Talmud. Maimonides even posits that one should only appoint to the court jurists who are exceptional not only in their knowledge of the Torah but also of "profuse intellect" (*ba'alei de'ah merubah*), and who have knowledge of the sciences (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Sanhedrin 2.1). He may be hinting by his use of the term "profuse intellect"

38 See *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 167, 311.

that ideally the jurists should also have knowledge of metaphysics. At any rate, it is clear from the parable of the king in the palace in *Guide* 3.51 that those who enter the palace are not simply great jurists but those who have also mastered the sciences, or what Maimonides terms in the introduction to his treatise, “the science (*‘ilm*) of the Law in its true sense” (5). Maimonides is well aware of the great gap between the ideal he posits and the current situation, as attested by his criticism of the philosophic ignorance exhibited by most of the rabbinic authorities of his period.³⁹ It is this gap that he hopes to at least narrow by way of his compositions.

In the final analysis, the gap between prophet and rabbinic sage in the area of legal knowledge does not exist at all for Maimonides, the prophet simply being a superior sage, while the gap between the prophet and the philosophic sage, which appears to exist, is nevertheless a vague one at best. Revelation is not a supernatural phenomenon for Maimonides. Hence even if he thought that there was a categorical difference between the type of theoretical knowledge attained by the prophet and the discursive knowledge of the philosopher, as I have argued, Maimonides still saw this knowledge as one the prophet attained in a natural manner by virtue of his qualifications and philosophic studies. The prophet is a superior type of philosopher who can glimpse metaphysical reality in a far more unified and penetrating manner as a result of his experience of revelation. It is this attainment more than any other that characterizes his perfection. Hence in the *Guide* the public prophet is depicted as serving also as a public philosopher. Yet his audience does not consist of elite students who can be taught theoretical truths in a rigorous philosophic manner. Rather it consists of the entire nation, which must be taught by way of images and rhetorical arguments, given the limits of their understanding. For the non-prophet, philosophy essentially still remains the only key one possesses to interpret the theoretical views underlying the prophetic images and speech.

³⁹ See for example what Maimonides writes in *Guide* 2.6 against contemporary rabbinic scholars, or the biting criticism in his *Treatise on Resurrection* of the lack of true philosophic knowledge exhibited by the Babylonian Gaon, Samuel ben Ali.

Sage and Prophet in Provençal Jewish Philosophy

The issue of the legal authority of the prophet was of far less interest to the Jewish philosophers of Provence than the issue of the nature of prophecy. Maimonides' approach to prophecy as an emanation from the Active Intellect to the perfect rational and imaginative faculties was widely accepted by them, and generally served as the starting point for their own comments on the subject. For example, Samuel Ibn Tibbon in his *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim* and Jacob Anatoli in his book of philosophical sermons, *Malmed ha-Talmidim*, assume that their readers are familiar with Maimonides' *Guide*, and his views on revelation underlie their usage of the term "prophecy" (*nevu'ah*) without further elaboration. Only on occasion do they refer explicitly to Maimonides' discussion.⁴⁰ Levi ben Avraham's extensive treatment of prophecy in *Livyat Hen* is based primarily on Maimonides' approach and is essentially an elaboration upon it.⁴¹ Nissim of Marseille in his *Ma'aseh Nissim* also deals with this subject in accordance with Maimonides' thought,⁴² as does Joseph Ibn Kaspi in a number of his writings.⁴³ From among the Provençal Jewish philosophers, Gersonides alone analyzes prophecy in an independent manner, though he shares with Maimonides many of his basic views on the subject.⁴⁴ As we shall see shortly, the thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century translations of

40 See, for example, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, ed. Mordechai Bisliches (Pressburg: Anton Edlen v. Schmid, 1837), chap. 19, 119; Jacob Anatoli, *Malmed ha-Talmidim*, ed. L. Silberman (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1866), 35b.

41 For a study of this treatise, see above, chapter 5. Levi devotes three chapters to discussing this phenomenon, as well as comparing the prophet to the diviner and the philosopher. See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007), chaps. 3-5, 115-185 (Heb.). He also has much to say on this topic in many other discussions throughout his treatise.

42 See above, chapter 6, 187-190.

43 For a discussion of Ibn Kaspi's approach to prophecy, see Barry Mesch, *Studies in Joseph Ibn Caspi* (Leiden: Brill, 1975).

44 For a study of Gersonides' approach to prophecy, see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 316-424. For divination and prophecy in Gersonides' thought, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Without Any Doubt: Gersonides on Method and Knowledge* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 221-323.

Arabic philosophical treatises into Hebrew played an important role in molding the views of the Jewish philosophers on this issue.⁴⁵

The question upon which I would like to focus here is whether these philosophers regarded the prophet as superior to the sage in theoretical matters, and if so, what is the nature of his superiority. All accorded the prophet the ability to divine the future, an ability the philosopher lacked, and saw in this ability an expression of divine providence. All of them also accepted Maimonides' position that the prophets were outstanding philosophers,⁴⁶ for complete knowledge of the sciences was a necessary condition for attaining prophecy, or in light of Avicenna's approach, they regarded the intuitive ability to attain this knowledge instantaneously towards the beginning of one's studies as characterizing the rational faculty of the prophet. Yet when it came to the problem of whether prophecy brought with it theoretical knowledge that could not be attained by the philosopher, they tended to be equivocal in their approaches, even while urging their readers to accept the doctrines of the prophets when they run counter to those of the philosophers. Their stances on this question are tied to several cardinal issues: 1) Is it possible to conjoin with the Active Intellect—an issue upon which the philosophers themselves disagreed (both in regard to this possibility and just as important, about the nature of conjunction)—and attain by way of emanation theoretical knowledge that is beyond the scope of what can be obtained by normal discursive reasoning? 2) Is this state to be regarded as a distinctly prophetic one, or can philosophers who are not prophets also attain it? 3) Even if ontological conjunction with the Active Intellect is not conceived as possible, is prophecy nevertheless to be characterized by the attainment of a level of theoretical knowledge by means of an emanation from the Active Intellect that philosophers are incapable of attaining, and if so, what is the nature of this knowledge? 4) To what extent did the Jewish philosophers commenting on this topic incorporate into their treatises esoteric doctrines that run counter to their explicit statements favoring

45 On these translations, see above, chapter 4, 81, 85-89.

46 Like Maimonides, they also regarded the most important Sages of the Talmud as steeped in scientific and philosophic wisdom.

prophetic doctrines over philosophic ones? In addition, the leadership role of the prophet, which distracted him from contemplation, raised the issue of whether this figure should indeed be considered superior to the sage who devotes himself entirely to contemplation, given the fact that the perfection of the intellect is true human perfection.

The possibility of the human intellect's conjunction (*devequt*) with the Active Intellect was accepted by Samuel Ibn Tibbon. Ibn Tibbon was familiar with Islamic philosophic approaches to this subject, having translated into Hebrew three short treatises by Averroes and his son 'Abdallāh on conjunction, which he attached to his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*.⁴⁷ He refers to this state in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* and in his *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, sees in the comprehension of all the sciences culminating in knowledge of God a necessary condition for its attainment, and connects it with the achievement of immortality.⁴⁸ Yet he does not enter into a discussion concerning the precise nature of the knowledge attained in this state, nor does he identify it with prophecy, but with ultimate wisdom. The latter point suggests that non-prophets are also in principle able to attain this state in his view, and the distinction between prophecy and philosophy is limited to the ability to divine. This point is reinforced by the fact that he hints in *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim* that the prophet may even err in matters pertaining to theoretical wisdom, as we have seen in the previous chapter.⁴⁹ It is true that in a number of passages of his commentary he cautions the reader to favor prophetic tradition over philosophic

47 These treatises were edited by J. Hercz, *Drei Abhandlungen über die Conjunction des seperaten Intellects mit dem Menschen von Averroes (Vater und Sohn)*, aus dem Arabischen übersetzt von Samuel Ibn Tibbon (Berlin: H. G. Hermann, 1869). For a study of Averroes' theory of the intellect and conjunction, as well as the theories of his predecessors, see in particular Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on the Intellect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Ibn Tibbon's commentary was edited by James T. Robinson, who also translated much of it into English, in his doctoral dissertation, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*" (PhD thesis, Harvard University, 2002). The English translation of the commentary was subsequently published by him as *Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: The Book of the Soul of Man* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

48 See "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*," on Ecclesiastes 3:19, 694-695; *Ma'amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayyim*, chap. 14, 98.

49 See above, chapter 7, 249-250.

views, but he identifies this tradition with the “good,” that is moral virtue, hinting thereby that they should be accepted not because of their truth but because of their salubrious influence on the religious community.⁵⁰

Samuel’s son, Moses Ibn Tibbon, in his commentary on *Song of Songs* interprets the entire book as an allegory concerning the state of conjunction.⁵¹ He also refers to this state in several passages in his *Sefer Pe’ab*.⁵² Yet like his father, he does not discuss the precise type of knowledge attained in this state, nor does he define this state as prophecy. He does, however, accord a fundamental advantage to the prophet over the philosopher regarding theoretical matters in a different passage of the latter treatise. In his explication of a *midrash* appearing in *Yalqut Shimoni* Exodus, 406, dealing with Moses’ sojourn on top of Mount Sinai for forty days and nights, he writes as follows:

In saying: “When He would teach him [Moses] Scripture”—they meant that he [Moses] would apprehend by prophecy or by the Holy Spirit intelligibles and the knowledge that precedes them that are not known by logical reasoning, and this is the divine knowledge and spiritual knowledge—”then he would know that it is day.” And when he would apprehend something by way of demonstration, and draw conclusions by the combination of two premises that are known in that they are first intelligibles, or in a different way, or he would expound them by one of the thirteen principles by means of which the Torah is expounded, and this is human knowledge, “he would know that it is night.”⁵³

In his depiction of prophecy in this passage, Moses Ibn Tibbon clearly has Maimonides’ discussion in *Guide* 2.38 in mind. While Maimonides, however, may be interpreted as referring to knowledge that in principle is attained by way of demonstration and that the prophet attains

50 See, for example, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Ecclesiastes 2:13, 626-627 (English, 348-349). See also Robinson’s comments on this issue on 111.

51 See Moses Ibn Tibbon, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, ed. L. Silberman (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1874), 8-13 (Heb.).

52 See *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, and Avraham Israel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 116, 123, 195, 213 (Heb.).

53 *Ibid.*, 103.

instantaneously, Moses Ibn Tibbon sees this prophetically attained knowledge as consisting of matters that are essentially closed to demonstration. It is interesting to note how he in this passage also blurs the distinction between the rabbinic sage and the philosopher insofar as both attain their conclusions by the use of logic, while Moses was able to attain the ultimate knowledge in both areas by divine illumination.

Positing the ability of the prophet to attain knowledge not known by demonstration appears to entail the view that prophetic doctrines should be favored over those of the philosophers when there is a conflict between them and the philosophic doctrines lack demonstrative proof. Yet as we have already seen in the case of Maimonides in regard to the doctrine of creation, while he appears to draw this conclusion, it is far from certain that he actually did. The reason for favoring a certain view—or the reason ascribed to the prophets themselves for teaching a certain view—may be due to political considerations rather than theoretical philosophic ones, as Samuel Ibn Tibbon's comments in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* indicate almost explicitly. In the case of Moses Ibn Tibbon, it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion regarding his stance on this issue based on his surviving writings. On the surface, he appears to accept the truth of prophetic doctrines over philosophic when he writes in *Sefer Pe'ah*: "The commandment of the Sabbath [comes] to verify the creation of the world as received in tradition against the view of the philosophers."⁵⁴ Yet the very next sentence may be interpreted as subtly negating this view: "The masses too reject the existence of anything that has no beginning or end." Creation thus may be seen as a crucial doctrine for the limited understanding of the masses, and not because it is true.

A similar dilemma confronts the interpreter of Moses Ibn Tibbon's uncle (and brother-in-law),⁵⁵ Jacob Anatoli (a student of Samuel Ibn Tibbon and both his brother-in-law and son-in-law). Anatoli writes in *Malmed ha-Talmidim*:

⁵⁴ *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 118.

⁵⁵ Anatoli was the brother of Samuel Ibn Tibbon's wife, and he went on to marry his niece.

This part teaches knowledge of the truth, and this is what is intended by the term “Torah.” The loftiest of this part is what is taught by way of prophetic tradition regarding the existence of the world and the manner of its coming into being and the other true stories concerning it. Due to the importance of this matter, the Torah began with a definitive tradition, not with a philosophic teaching, so that a youth belonging to the Torah community attains knowledge based on tradition regarding the truth of the existence of the world that an old person from among the sages of philosophy cannot attain by way of his studies. . . . Consequently, a member of the religious community should believe with an enduring faith in everything that comes from the Torah, much more than in the things that are known by way of logical reasoning. In this way he will stand firm against those who dispute him by way of logical reasoning, and he will maintain that so it was taught by prophecy. And even though this is not a philosophic teaching that one can investigate and refine from it the truth, it was refined by prophecy, as the Sage [Solomon] said regarding this matter: *The word of God is refined, He is a shield to all who trust in Him* [Proverbs 30:5].⁵⁶

Despite this position that accords a clear advantage to prophetic tradition over philosophic investigation, it is not clear that Anatoli actually believes that the Torah reveals theoretical truths that are not known by way of philosophy. Some of the remarks scattered throughout his treatise can be interpreted as suggesting that he may have held an esoteric view on this matter, and that he thought, like Samuel Ibn Tibbon, that the Torah taught these doctrines for political reasons.⁵⁷

The dictum “the sage is superior to the prophet” (BT Baba Batra 12a) is brought by Anatoli in one of his sermons. Following Maimonides, he does not accord superiority to the sages who are not prophets over the prophets who are necessarily also sages. Since this dictum appears to imply that there can be prophets who are not also sages, he strove to interpret its intent differently in order to avoid this conclusion:

56 *Malmed ba-Talmidim*, 1b. See also 31b, 32b; there too he indicates that some of the Torah’s secrets—such as creation, reward and punishment, and the resurrection of the dead—cannot be known by way of philosophy.

57 See Israel Ben-Simon, “The Philosophical and Allegorical Teachings of Rabbi Jacob Anatoli and His Influence on Jewish Thought and Allegory in Provence in the 13th-14th Centuries” (PhD thesis, University of Haifa, 2012), 4-72 (Heb.).

Since wisdom is the cause of prophecy, they said: “The sage is superior to the prophet.” That is to say, wisdom in itself, from the perspective of its essence, is greater than prophecy in itself, in accordance with what the sages said that the cause is greater than the effect. This is something of which there is no doubt. They did not intend [to say] by this dictum that there may be a prophet who is not also a sage.⁵⁸

Anatoli sees wisdom as the main prerequisite for prophecy and superior to any other advantage accorded by prophecy. This interpretation, however, does not directly address the issue of whether the prophet has any advantage over the philosopher in theoretical matters, or if his advantage lies solely in the other areas of knowledge that characterize prophecy, most notably divination.⁵⁹ Hence Anatoli’s stance on this crucial issue remains an open question dependent upon the problem of whether he designed his sermons to contain an esoteric level.

An equivocal attitude on this issue can also be detected in Levi ben Avraham’s *Livyat Hen*. Levi too brings the rabbinic dictum of the superiority of the sage over the prophet and offers a variety of interpretations. In one of them he treats “prophet” as referring not to the true prophets, but to those individuals possessing only a perfect imagination and the power of divination. These individuals at times are also loosely termed “prophets,” as Maimonides indicates in *Guide* 2.32. The philosopher is clearly superior to such an individual. More important for our discussion are two other interpretations Levi brings:

Inssofar as wisdom is the cause of prophecy and prior to it, and is an enduring perfection that adheres [in the individual] and grows stronger in old age, they said: “The sage is superior to the prophet”—that is, to the prophet who is not as great a sage as he is, though he too is a sage and prophesies due to his preparedness and the excellence of his physical temperament. There is no doubt, as emerges from the statements of the Sages, that many of the sages apprehended

58 *Malmad ha-Talmidim*, 151a.

59 See also *ibid.*, 77a, where Anatoli sees prophecy as following in the wake of the apprehension of the Active Intellect and the attainment of final perfection. He does not indicate in this context, however, what prophecy adds to this perfection in regard to theoretical knowledge.

more than many of the prophets did. . . . It is possible that they said: “The sage is superior to the prophet,” because the sage-prophet, insofar as he leads the nation, must possess a practical intellect and must exert himself in the use of the faculty of imagination. Moreover, most of his discourse concerns practical, pedestrian, accidental matters, which appear to him by way of the imagination. The perfect sage who is not a prophet, however, can deal exclusively with theoretical matters, without having to arouse the imagination and involve the practical intellect. Furthermore, most of his discourse deals with theoretical, necessary, divine matters. It is possible that he could become a prophet if he would prepare himself accordingly. Instead, he [prefers to] devote his time to perfecting his soul by continuously learning the different types of wisdom. This is similar to what is said of R. Ḥanina ben Dosa, that his prayers were more readily accepted because he put all his efforts in this matter. R. Yoḥanan ben Zakai said: “R. Ḥanina is like a slave before the king, while I am like a minister before the king” [BT Berakhot 34b].⁶⁰

In his first interpretation, Levi essentially denies that the prophet has any advantage over the sage in theoretical matters, going so far as to maintain explicitly that there were sages who in their apprehension of theoretical matters were greater than many of the prophets, R. Yoḥanan ben Zakai and R. Akiva being two examples that Levi had in mind based on the stories the Talmud relates about them in the second chapter of BT Ḥagigah. Levi also points out that prophecy is attained by the individual intermittently, while wisdom adheres in him permanently, growing even stronger in his old age—a point noted by Maimonides in *Guide* 3.51, where he speaks of conjunction being attained precisely in this period of life, when the bodily faculties grow weaker.⁶¹ Maimonides’ comments imply the view that prophecy, being dependent upon one’s bodily faculties, does not appear at all in one’s old age, while one can grow even wiser in one’s knowledge of the theoretical sciences in this period. Levi himself goes on to note this point explicitly in the continuation of his remarks, thereby distinguishing the phenomenon of prophecy from the attainment of theoretical knowledge.

60 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 120-122.

61 See also *Guide* 1.54.

The second interpretation Levi brings is even more noteworthy. It not only ascribes to some of the sages greater theoretical knowledge than that possessed by some of the prophets, but regards the figure of the sage as superior to that of the prophet. The prophet *qua* prophet devotes most of his efforts to political activity (including divination), which in Levi's view acts as a stumbling block to increasing one's true perfection, that of the theoretical intellect. In other words, due to his uninterrupted studies, the sage *qua* sage can go much further in his attainment of theoretical knowledge than the prophet, hence it is preferable to remain a sage and not strive for prophecy. On this point, Levi calls into question the model of final perfection posited by Maimonides, whose practical component consists of political leadership.⁶²

Levi was hardly the first among the Provençal Jewish philosophers to challenge Maimonides on this point. He follows in the footsteps of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, who voices a not so subtle criticism of Maimonides' view.⁶³ After apologizing in advance for taking issue with Maimonides, Ibn Tibbon writes as follows in his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* on the verse *I sleep but my heart is awake* (Song of Songs 5:2):

Even though he [Maimonides], of blessed memory, said that this matter applies only to the Master of the Prophets and to the patriarchs, peace be upon them, and that none like them can be found, it is true that none are like them in being asleep while their hearts are awake. For all of them directed their efforts to matters that were not necessary in order to sustain their bodies, and by this they compromised the perfection of that union [with God or the Active Intellect] mentioned in that chapter [*Guide* 3.51]. Every effort that results in compromising the strength of that union is [termed] "sleep" or something similar to sleep. Despite this, their hearts were awake—that is to say, their thought remained in that union. Was not the Master of Prophets absorbed in the toil of leading a nation. . . . This resulted in his being distracted in his contemplation, his thoughts disturbed, and their clarity sullied.⁶⁴ The patriarchs too exerted efforts in [tending] their flocks, in [attaining] honor and so forth, and in

62 For a discussion of Maimonides' model of final perfection and the various scholarly approaches to this topic, see *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 125-158.

63 See Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Political Role of the Philosopher: Samuel Ibn Tibbon Versus Maimonides," *Maimonidean Studies* 5 (2008): 345-374.

64 Maimonides too suggests this point at the end of *Guide* 2.36.

wandering from place to place because of the needs of their flocks. Some also had many wives and children. In all of them there is to be found a deficiency from this perspective. . . . What could have been said of Moses . . . if he had not spent his time in leading a nation and adjudicating their disputes, but had isolated himself in contemplation and in strengthening the conjunction with the “lover”? The same is true of the patriarchs and those who are like them. . . . In conclusion, there is a great difference between one who sleeps and whose heart is awake and one who is completely awake.⁶⁵

In a similar manner, Samuel Ibn Tibbon takes issue with Maimonides’ interpretation at the very end of the *Guide* of Jeremiah 9:22-23, in which Maimonides indicates that God delights in the exercise of *loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth*, and not solely in the knowledge of Him—that is to say, the ultimate perfection of the philosopher lies in engaging in political leadership. To Ibn Tibbon, as he clarifies in the introduction to his translation of Maimonides’ *Commentary on Mishnah Avot*, God’s delight refers to *understanding and knowing me*, and not to the other three terms, for it is solely theoretical knowledge that is the ultimate end of humanity.⁶⁶ From this perspective, it is clear that while Ibn Tibbon does not bring the dictum that the sage is superior to the prophet, he, like Levi after him, is certainly of the opinion that this is the case. Political leadership, rather than being viewed as complementing final human perfection—which lies in the perfection of the theoretical intellect—and adding to it by serving as a form of *imitatio Dei*, is seen as inevitably detracting from it.⁶⁷

In his discussion of prophecy, Levi does not deal with the notion of conjunction with the Active Intellect. This subject is mentioned in passing in several passages of his treatise, and is tied to the attainment

65 *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, 668-669; see Ravitzky, “The Political Role of the Philosopher,” 351.

66 See Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides and Samuel Ibn Tibbon on Jeremiah 9:22-23 and Human Perfection,” in *Studies in Halakha and Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Menachem Emanuel Rackman*, ed. Moshe Beer (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1994), 49-57. See also Abraham Melamed, *Philosopher-King in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 53-54; Ravitzky, “The Political Role of the Philosopher,” 359-366.

67 For a discussion of this issue in Maimonides’ thought, see *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 125-158.

of a perfect intellect—the acquired intellect—and immortality, but not with prophecy *per se*.⁶⁸ Levi almost definitely dealt with this notion in detail in the lost fourth treatise of his encyclopedia—a treatise devoted to the natural sciences, including the nature of the human soul and intellect. This point can be seen from his encyclopedic poem, *Batei ha-Nefesh ve-ha-Lehashim*, where he devotes a section of it to the human intellect and to conjunction.⁶⁹ From these sources one sees clearly that Levi did not view conjunction as a distinctly prophetic attainment. This reinforces the conclusion that he accorded no advantage to the prophet over the sage in theoretical matters.

Yet there is another side to Levi's thought, which opposes this picture. In a chapter devoted to the issue of the difference between prophetic and philosophic knowledge, Levi maintains that while most of prophecy is concerned with future events, it also deals with theoretical matters. Basing himself on Maimonides, he writes:

At times, prophecy perfects the knowledge of the prophet and instructs him in theoretical matters, as the Master (Maimonides) indicated, on the condition that he already is a sage, as stated above. For he who possesses a pure, refined soul, and whose intellect always concentrates on the intelligibles, and who habituates his intellect to be *in actu*—the Separate Intellect will emanate upon him true theoretical matters that are more exalted than the matters that are in the nature of a person to apprehend. By focusing [his thought] on God and conjoining with Him, God will direct him and inform him of things related to what he already knows, and more often, that which his heart craves to know. It is more probable for this to occur in a vision than in a dream. . . .⁷⁰ There is no doubt that the Torah informed us of many things that are at the pinnacle of what the intellects of the most adept philosophers reached at the end of their

68 See, for example, *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 50; see also *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2014), 10, 46, 137, 144, 148 (Heb.).

69 This section of the poem has been edited by Dov Schwartz, together with the commentary of Prat Maimon (Solomon ben Menaḥem), “The Commentary of R. Solomon ben Menaḥem to ‘Batei ha-Nephesh ve-ha-Lehashim’ on the Subject of the Intellect,” *Kobez al Yad* 13[23] (1996): 299-330 (Heb.).

70 See *Guide* 2.45, where Maimonides writes that visions of prophecy deal only with theoretical matters.

speculation and investigation. Furthermore, some of the secrets were made known by way of prophecy to some of the prophets, and they attained what was not in the power of the philosophers to attain by way of logical reasoning. The Master indicated that prophecy is greater than [logical] proof, and the point to which prophecy reaches, proof does not reach. . . .⁷¹ What is known by prophecy has an utmost limit which cannot be surpassed, since the apprehension of the human intellect cannot surpass the apprehension of its origin.⁷² Moreover, many matters about which the prophet had no previous knowledge at all, he would not apprehend by way of prophecy.⁷³

Levi appears to agree that the prophet indeed can attain theoretical knowledge that surpasses what can be known by philosophy, though not what is beyond the limits of the human intellect as such to apprehend. He even agrees that some of this knowledge will appear to the prophet in a vision—that is to say, as presented by the imagination as a result of the emanation from on high while the prophet is awake. Levi’s proviso in this case is similar to the one pertaining to knowledge of the future; the prophet receives knowledge on subjects upon which he focuses his attention and about which he has previous knowledge. This serves to “particularize” the emanation from the Active Intellect that reaches the rational and imaginative faculties, thereby enabling the individual to apprehend new matters—some of which he would not have been able to apprehend otherwise—based on the knowledge that was already in his possession and he was thinking about.

In the continuation of his discussion, Levi further elaborates upon the distinction between the prophetic and non-prophetic intellect, drawing upon sources in Arabic philosophy that existed in Hebrew translation:

71 Levi is referring here to what was written in an epistle to Ḥasdai Halevi by a student of Maimonides in Maimonides’ name; see *Iggerot HaRambam*, 678-679. The authenticity of this epistle is still being debated by scholars.

72 The origin of the human intellect is the Active Intellect. The sentence can mean either that the human intellect cannot know more than what the Active Intellect knows, or that it cannot get beyond the level of apprehending the Active Intellect. In Aristotelian philosophy, both meanings are similar given the principle of the identity between the intellect of the knower and the object of one’s knowledge.

73 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 168-170.

Averroes writes in the treatise *Moznei ha-Iyyunim* that the prophet, in his being a perfect creation, does not need to attain the intelligibles and sciences by way of logical syllogisms and preliminary knowledge, but finds the intelligible matters as though they were inscribed in his soul, and a slight allusion and effort is sufficient [to attain them], just as the angels do not require them [logical syllogisms and preliminary knowledge]. The explanation of this is that the knowledge of the angels is an ordered, natural self-knowledge, in which the knowledge of the effects from their causes is apparent from the outset, and the effects that are necessitated from their effects as well, and everything that is apt to follow from them. This is a simple knowledge that includes all that is below it, which is always apparent to them [the angels] from the outset, as in the case of the first intelligibles by us. They know the last by virtue of the first that includes it, not in the inverse manner as is the case by us. . . . Let us return to the words of Averroes who said that the perfect prophet, like the angels, knows the sciences by way of a few allusions without the need for syllogisms. For just as there is found among human beings a specimen of the utmost deficiency, close to the beasts, so it is necessary that there be found a perfect specimen, close to the level of the angels. . . . For the person who attained some knowledge and is of refined matter and pure intellect, it is possible that he [mentally] isolates himself and extracts himself from his matter and receive the emanation of the Separate Intellect. It is said in the *Book of Circles*: “God, may He be blessed, perfected this creature at the beginning of its creation in order to lead the world by means of him, and to perfect deficient human beings by laying down religions, laws, admonitions, and promises of reward, and to relate matters that the philosophical soul is incapable of knowing. To the philosophic soul He granted the investigation of generalities alone. For this reason Plato said: ‘We are incapable of understanding what was given in the Laws by the prophets; we understand just a little and are ignorant of a lot.’”⁷⁴ For this reason the Torah is called “prophetic wisdom” or “divine wisdom,” and theoretical science is called “human wisdom.”⁷⁵

The treatise *Moznei ha-Iyyunim* cited by Levi in this passage is an Arabic Neoplatonic treatise that was translated into Hebrew by Jacob ben Makhir, a contemporary of Levi and a member of the Tibbonid

74 Al-Batalyawsi, *Ha-Agulot Ha-Ra'ayoniyot*, ed. David Kaufmann (Budapest, 1880), 16-17. The citation from Plato is based on the *Apology*, 20d-e.

75 *Livyat H̄en: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, 171-172.

family.⁷⁶ The treatise was generally ascribed either to Al-Ghazali or Averroes, though the latter definitely was not the author and it is highly doubtful that the former was.⁷⁷ Levi follows in the footsteps of Moses Ibn Tibbon, who had also ascribed the treatise to Averroes.⁷⁸ This treatise draws heavily from Al-Batalyawsi's *Book of Circles* (translated by Moses Ibn Tibbon and also cited in this passage by Levi), copying parts of it word for word. Al-Batalyawsi's treatise, in turn, appears to be greatly influenced by Avicenna, as well as by other Islamic philosophers and by the Brethren of Purity.⁷⁹ The author of *Moznei ha-'Iyyunim* repeats the categorical distinction drawn by Al-Batalyawsi between the philosophic soul and the prophetic.⁸⁰ It is not only the ability to lay down laws and doctrines for the masses that distinguishes the two souls, but also the far greater intuitive ability of the prophet to attain intelligibles, reflective of Avicenna's approach, as well as the ability to reach a higher level of theoretical knowledge. Levi points out that in the normal discursive manner in which human beings attain knowledge, the causes are known by an investigation of the effects. The prophet, however, reaches a level of knowledge similar to that of the Active Intellect in which he knows the cause of existence as a simple, all-inclusive intelligible, through which all the effects are thereby known.⁸¹

76 The treatise has survived in manuscript. Chapters 10-12 have been published by Leopold Dukes in *Otzar Neḥmad* 2 (1857): 196-198. Levi's paraphrase from this work appears in chap. 11, 198.

77 For a study of this issue, see Benjamin Abrahamov, "The Sources of *Mozné Ha-'Iyyunim*," *Daat* 34 (1995): 83-86 (Heb.).

78 See Zevi Diesendruck, "Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence," *HUCA* 11 (1936): 364.

79 For a study of Al-Batalyawsi's thought, his sources, and his influence on Jewish thinkers, see Ayala Eliyahu, "Ibn al-Sid al-Batalyawsi and his Place in Medieval Muslim and Jewish Thought" (PhD thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2010) (Heb.).

80 See *Moznei ha-'Iyyunim*, 196-198; *Ha-'Agulot Ha-Ra'ayoniyot*, 12-17.

81 Ibn Falaquera, a contemporary of Levi who probably was born and lived in Spain (though he may have lived in Southern France), adopts a similar approach in his commentary on the *Guide, Moreh ha-Moreh*. He posits the possibility of conjunction with the Active Intellect and a distinct level of theoretical knowledge attained in this state. Moreover, he sees this state as characterizing the prophets, though some of the sages also reached it. The prophet learns, by means of the "divine

In addition to a higher level of knowledge of existence that characterizes the apprehension of the prophets, Levi also posits their attainment of doctrines that cannot be attained by the philosopher. The creation of the world is a prime example of this category, as Levi's subsequent discussion clarifies.⁸² In his case too, we are left with the dilemma that if he holds an esoteric view on the subject, particularly in light of his conflicting stance regarding prophetic knowledge versus philosophic knowledge in theoretical matters. The issue is not an easy one to decide, since Levi appears to be genuinely committed to the truth of the doctrine of creation, and not only its necessity for political purposes.

While Levi appears to equivocate on the issue of the superiority of the prophet over the philosopher in his theoretical knowledge, Ibn Kaspi's position is less ambiguous. He clearly favors the prophet, arguing that his main advantage lies in his knowledge of metaphysics that surpasses that of the philosopher, and not in his knowledge of the future.⁸³ Following Ibn Falaquera's commentary on *Guide* 1.34, he approvingly cites Avicenna's view of the intuitive power of the prophetic intellect that allows him to conjoin with the Active Intellect and attain all intelligibles without effort and without the years of study that Maimonides posits as necessary for perfection.⁸⁴ Moreover, he sees

knowledge" attained in this state, the secrets of divine governance in a manner that is closed to philosophic speculation. Ibn Falaquera approvingly cites Avicenna's view regarding the prophetic intellect. See *Moreh ha-Moreh*, introduction, 116-117; 1.1, 121-122; 1.34, 137; 3.54, 328; appendix, chap. 1, 333-336. Isaac Albalag, another contemporary of Levi who probably lived in Spain (Catalonia), also stresses the distinct level of theoretical knowledge attained by the prophet. Like Levi, he sees discursive knowledge as involving the investigation of the effects in order to apprehend the causes, while the prophet, like the Separate Intellects, knows the intelligibles in inverse order—i.e., by knowledge of the causes it knows all the effects. See Isaac Albalag, *Sefer Tiqqun ha-De'ot*, ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of the Sciences, 1973), 67, 82.

82 *Livyat Hēn: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 65-79. For a discussion of this issue, see my introduction to this volume, 32-37.

83 See *Maskiyyot Kesef*, ed. Solomon Werblunger (Frankfurt A.M., 1848), 2.8, 94; 2.36, 115; *'Amudei Kesef*, ed. Solomon Werblunger (Frankfurt A.M., 1848), 3.51, 143; *Shulhan Kesef*, ed. Hannah Kasher (Jerusalem: Ben-Zevi Institute, 1996), 172; *Tirat Kesef*, in *Mishneh Kesef*, vol. 1, ed. Isaac Last (Pressburg, 1905), 88.

84 See *'Amudei Kesef* 1.34, 44; see also *Shulhan Kesef*, 172.

Averroes agreeing to the superiority of prophetic knowledge over philosophic, a point to which I shall return below. Yet on the issue of creation, Ibn Kaspi's position is not without problems. While in a number of passages he indicates that this doctrine should be favored since prophecy is superior to philosophy,⁸⁵ he is inclined to interpret Maimonides as favoring the eternity of the world and understanding the Torah accordingly.⁸⁶ This does not necessarily entail the conclusion, however, that Ibn Kaspi was not committed to the position of the superiority of the theoretical knowledge of the prophet over that of the philosopher; he undoubtedly agreed that the prophets made use of esotericism in conveying some of their views and this may be the case here too. Moreover, he is reluctant to ascribe errors to the prophets in theoretical matters, such as in the case of Ezekiel, who apparently believed that the heavenly bodies emit sounds—a view based on the mistaken belief that the stars are in motion and not the spheres to which they are attached⁸⁷—and he struggles mightily with this issue.⁸⁸

Nissim of Marseille, a contemporary of Ibn Kaspi, adopts a contrary stance on this issue. He accepts the notion that intellectual perfection is a necessary condition for prophecy, but does not grant the prophet any advantage over the philosopher in theoretical matters. The superiority of the prophet over the philosopher is limited to the ability to foretell the future, a view that echoes that of Samuel Ibn Tibbon. Nissim is even prepared to argue against Maimonides, who it appears to him adopts the opposite conclusion:

Maimonides already wrote in chapter thirty-eight of the second part [of the *Guide*] as follows: “Know that the true prophets indubitably grasp speculative matters; by means of his speculation alone, man is

85 See *Maskiyyot Kesef* 2.8, 94; 2.12, 99; *Shulhan Kesef*, 172.

86 See *Maskiyyot Kesef* 2.8, 94; 2.12, 99. His position in *Gevi'a Kesef*, 6 may also be read as favoring the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as one that is necessary for the masses but not a true one; see Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *Gevi'a Kesef*, ed. and trans. Basil Herring (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), XIV, 163.

87 See *Guide* 2.8.

88 See *Maskiyyot Kesef* 2.8, 94; *Menorat Kesef*, in 'Asarah Kelei Kesef, vol. 2, ed. Isaac Last (Pressburg, 1903), 122. For the issue of prophetic error, see above, chapter 7, 249-250.

unable to grasp the causes from which what a prophet has come to know necessarily follows.” Thus according to the opinion of the Master, the purpose of prophecy is not only to complete the preservation of the body, that is, to preserve it from afflictions, but also to complete the theoretical rational part [of the soul] by doctrines whose premises necessitating their truth the person has no way of acquiring, as though prophecy involves the perfection of the body and the soul. Yet in my opinion, the doctrines and knowledge that are in the power of a person to grasp by way of speculation and logic cannot in anyway reach a person in a vision or a dream of prophecy. If there were a way for this to happen, logical investigation and knowledge of it would be superfluous. For what can be [attained] without toil and investigation and without means, the means and the investigation of it would be for naught. The long path would be in vain, insofar as there is a different path that is better and shorter than it.⁸⁹

Nissim’s argument regarding the non-superiority of the prophet in theoretical matters since it is impossible to attain this type of knowledge without possessing the requisite preliminary knowledge, is similar to Averroes’ argument in *Epitome of Parva Naturalia* (translated by Moses Ibn Tibbon in 1254) and even closer to his argument in *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* (translated by Kalonymos ben Kalonymos ca. 1315).⁹⁰ In the former work, Averroes writes:

In general, the acquisition of any of the concepts of the theoretical sciences in this manner [by way of veridical dreams] would be accidental and rare. It is therefore impossible that a theoretical art be fully acquired by a person, by God, unless a person assumes that we have here a species of man that can comprehend the theoretical sciences without training. Now this species, if it indeed existed, would be called “man” only equivocally, but actually it would be closer to angels than to man. Now it will be seen from that which I shall say below that this is impossible.⁹¹

89 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 166.

90 Nissim does not cite explicitly from either commentary but there is reason to believe that he was acquainted with both of them.

91 Averroes, *Epitome of Parva Naturalia*, trans. Harry Blumberg (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1961), 52. *Moreh ha-Moreh* 1.34, 136-137; see the references brought by the editor Yair Shiffman in his notes.

Averroes continues by arguing against the possibility of attaining knowledge without training, insofar as training would then not be a necessary cause for its acquisition, while in his view it undoubtedly is. He further argues that if theoretical knowledge were to come in visions to one who had undergone no logical training, such knowledge would be superfluous and of inferior nature given their imaginative form. In the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics*, his argument against attaining knowledge without training is that if one were able to attain knowledge without premises, the premises would be for naught, which is comparable to the case of being able to walk without feet, thereby making the feet superfluous, and “nature negates this.” Here too Averroes concludes that people who can attain the intelligibles without training are “more appropriately considered to be angels rather than men,” a possibility that he dismisses.⁹²

Averroes was well aware of Avicenna’s view on the prophetic intellect, and cites it in *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, but does not critique it there.⁹³ Ibn Falaquera, who had a thorough knowledge of Arabic, cites Averroes’ view from the *Long Commentary on the Metaphysics* in *Moreh ha-Moreh*, in which he denies the possibility of attaining all the intelligibles at once, and juxtaposes this view with that of Avicenna.⁹⁴ Yet even leaving aside *Moznei ha-Iyyunim*, Averroes’s comments regarding the existence of an angelic type of person received contradictory interpretations on the part of the Jewish philosophers, not all of them seeing him as completely dismissing the possibility of such an individual. Ibn Kaspi, for example, draws upon Ibn Falaquera’s commentary on *Guide* 1.34, as I indicated above. He copies Ibn Falaquera’s citation from Avicenna, but in the case of Averroes he introduces a number of noteworthy changes. He ascribes the view regarding an angelic species of human beings to Aristotle, mentions

92 My summary is based on the citation brought by Ibn Falaquera in *Moreh ha-Moreh*; see the previous note.

93 Averroes in *Incoherence of the Incoherence* brings Al-Ghazali’s description of this view in *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, without disagreeing with it; see Averroes, *Incoherence of the Incoherence (Tabāfut al-Tabāfut)*, trans. Simon Van Den Bergh (London: Luzac and Company, 1954), Natural Sciences, 313.

94 See *Moreh ha-Moreh* 1.34, 137. Yair Shiffman cites the references in his notes.

Parva Naturalia as the source of the view, and presents it as a possibility accepted by Averroes (Aristotle) rather than negated by him. He interprets Maimonides accordingly. The necessity of long years of learning in order to master metaphysics as posited by Maimonides, Ibn Kaspi treats as characterizing all those who do not possess this special type of intellect.⁹⁵ Moreover, even Ibn Falaquera ascribes to Averroes the view that the prophet reaches knowledge that completes the knowledge attained by the intellect and which cannot be known by it, a view based on Averroes' comments in *Incoherence of the Incoherence*.⁹⁶

Nissim was aware of Avicenna's view regarding the prophetic intellect from Levi's *Livyat Hen*. He copies from Levi's paraphrase of *Moznei ha-'Iyyunim*, and even approvingly brings the quote ascribed to Plato regarding human inability to understand what is given in prophetic knowledge.⁹⁷ He sees in this view the key to understanding the unique prophecy of Moses. Following Maimonides, he regards Mosaic prophecy as purely intellectual, without the mediation of the imagination.⁹⁸ Moses alone was able to attain the form of pure intellect and learn the intelligibles with little effort. Yet even in this case, Nissim appears to regard Moses as receiving prophecy at the culmination of a long process of learning, though his superior intellect enabled him to grasp intelligibles with great ease. Moreover, the doctrines taught by Moses and whose contraries cannot be demonstrated by the philosophers, such as creation, served an important political function in his view, but they are not literally true, as we have seen above.⁹⁹ Moses' advantage over all other prophets and philosophers in regard to theoretical knowledge thus does not appear to be a categorical one according to Nissim; his advantage lies primarily in his ability to lay down an ideal law.

95 See 'Amudei Kesef 1.34, 44; see also *Menorat Kesef*, 93.

96 See *Moreh ha-Moreh* 2.23, 283; Averroes, *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, III, 152 (see also I, 56; XVI, 307). Ibn Kaspi cites Averroes' comment in 'Amudei Kesef 3.13, 125. Averroes also presents in this treatise the view that every prophet is a sage (Natural Sciences, IV, 359-360). Yet it appears that Averroes adopts this position as a pious fraud. In *Incoherence*, VI, 218, he essentially rejects the view that the inner sense of revealed religion expresses truths barred from speculation.

97 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 175. See also below, chapter 11, 398.

98 For a discussion of Mosaic prophecy, see the next chapter.

99 See chapter 6, 180.

Gersonides, a contemporary of Nissim, adopts a similar position, and goes to great lengths in defending it from a philosophic perspective. The prophet is an exceptional philosopher in his view. He also has an intuitive rational ability to attain intelligibles more quickly than the average philosopher and thereby attain prophecy. Thus he may be capable of grasping certain intelligibles by way of logical reasoning that the philosophers who are not prophets fail to grasp. Yet Avicenna's notion of the special intuitive property of the prophetic intellect that enables him to attain all intelligibles instantaneously without effort has no place in Gersonides' thought. Nor is there any categorical difference in his view between prophet and philosopher in their theoretical knowledge. Prophecy does not bestow upon the prophet a superior type of knowledge of God and the world. Furthermore, in the introduction to his treatise *The Wars of the Lord*, Gersonides defends his tackling of very difficult theoretical issues that have not been adequately solved philosophically till now, at least not in his eyes, by arguing that a person may well be capable of grasping matters that eluded earlier sages, clearly implying that they eluded the prophets as well.¹⁰⁰

Gersonides denies the possibility for any human being, even a prophet, to grasp the Active Intellect. The gap between the knowledge possessed by the Active Intellect and the knowledge that it is within the ability of even the perfect human being to attain can never be bridged. Human knowledge by nature will always be incomplete. No one, for example, can grasp all the details of the manner in which the heavenly bodies influence the earth—a knowledge that exists in the Active Intellect as a complete unity.¹⁰¹ Gersonides does not deny the view that a certain level of unity characterizes human apprehension too, since the intelligibles exist in a hierarchical order, with the higher level ones encompassing the lower. The more profound the intelligible that a person apprehends, the broader and more unified the knowledge of the intelligibles leading to its apprehension.¹⁰² By climbing the ladder

100 See Levi ben Gershom, *The Wars of the Lord*, trans. Seymour Feldman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), vol. 1, 93-97.

101 See *The Wars of the Lord* 1.6; *Commentary to I Kings* 8 (lesson 18).

102 See *The Wars of the Lord* 1.13.

of knowledge, the individual continuously comes closer the unity of knowledge possessed by the Active Intellect, though he can never reach it. Though Gersonides describes the higher levels of human apprehension by the term “conjunction” (*devequt*), he does not wish to denote by this usage an actual ontological union with the Active Intellect. Rather, conjunction signifies the stage at which a person attains a special type of providence.¹⁰³ While even philosophers who accepted the possibility of some form of union with the Active Intellect generally did not see this union as complete, but with some gap between the two remaining,¹⁰⁴ Gersonides is far more interested in stressing the insurmountability of this gap.¹⁰⁵

The prophet then is essentially a superior philosopher in Gersonides’ thought, with his substantive advantage over the philosopher lying in the field of divination. There is, however, one slight advantage that Gersonides is prepared to grant the prophet *qua* prophet that belongs to the area of theoretical knowledge. Occasionally the prophet is able to attain an intelligible while asleep, which appears to him in imaginative form, due to the power of his rational and imaginative faculties. In this way, Gersonides explains the prophetic visions concerning theoretical matters. Yet even in this case the prophet only completes the last step in the reasoning process, having possessed beforehand all the necessary premises.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, if the prophet believes in a false premise, as was the case of Ezekiel, then there will be an error in his vision as well.¹⁰⁷

103 Ibid. 4.6; *Commentary on Job* 34. See Seymour Feldman, “Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect,” *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 99-120.

104 Ibn Kaspi, for example, maintains that Moses conjoined with the Active Intellect but nonetheless was not equal to it in his intellection; see ‘*Amudei Kesef* 2.4, 91; *Maskiyot Kesef* 1.36, 50.

105 In the case of Moses, Gersonides posits a level of intellection that comes close to that of the Active Intellect, though even in this case he explicitly denies Moses’ ability to apprehend the Separate Intellecets; see his *Commentary on Exodus* 33:19-23; *Commentary on Numbers* 12:8.

106 See *The Wars of the Lord* 2.4; 2.6; *Commentary on I Kings* 11 (lesson 3); Alexander Altmann, “Gersonides’ Commentary on Averroes’ Epitome of *Parva Naturalia*,” in *American Academy for Jewish Research Jubilee Volume*, ed. Salo Baron and Isaac Barzilay (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1980), 24.

107 See *Commentary on Genesis* 15:4; *Commentary on Job* 39.

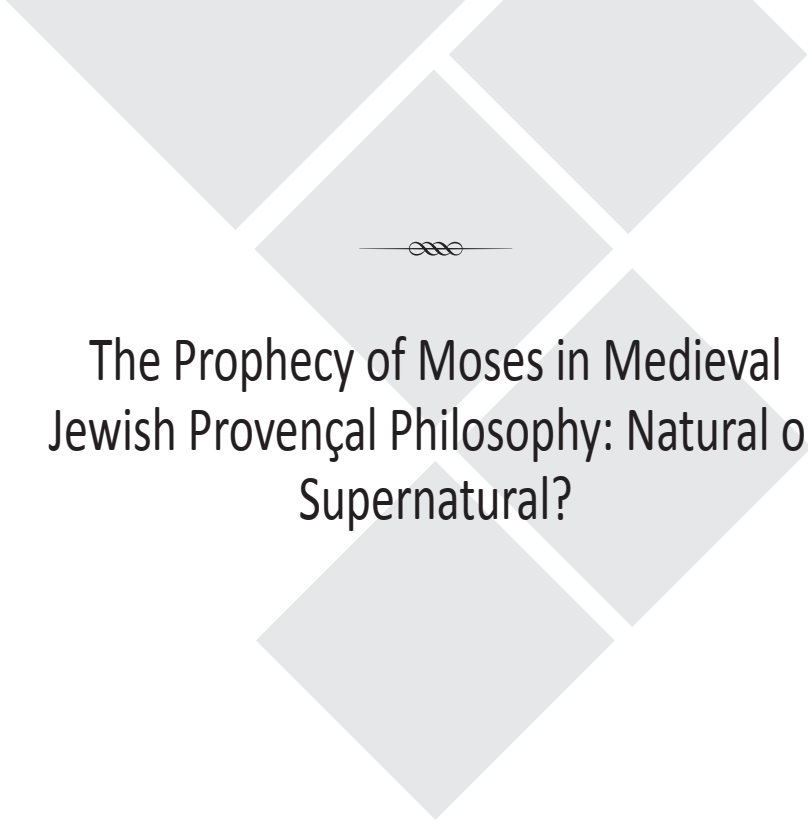
After Gersonides, the discussion of this issue continues, mostly on the part of Spanish Jewish philosophers; Spain replaced Southern France as the center of Jewish philosophy by the middle of the fourteenth century. Even Moses Narboni, who has much to say regarding the relation between prophet and philosopher, and even more on the subject of conjunction, wrote all his works in Spain.¹⁰⁸ Yet until one reaches the great Spanish Jewish philosopher Ḥasdai Crescas toward the end of the fourteenth century,¹⁰⁹ it is hard to discern any new dimensions that are introduced into these discussions. Following Maimonides, all the Jewish philosophers discussed in this chapter, as well as their Spanish counterparts, viewed normative prophecy as a natural phenomenon. Consequently, the questions they addressed essentially focus on the types of theoretical knowledge that can be attained naturally, the characteristics of the perfect intellect that attains them, and whether the intellect undergoes a type of transformation at the culmination of the process. For those who posited a higher-level knowledge and saw it as characterizing prophecy, this “divine knowledge,” like “human knowledge,” is essentially a different superior category of *natural* knowledge, which is not to be distinguished by its agent but by its features, though some of the Jewish philosophers sought to obfuscate this point to some degree. While they all counseled accepting the views of the prophets over those of the philosophers when there was a conflict between them, it appears that many of the Jewish philosophers were apt to regard these views as ones that are

108 Narboni discusses these issues in a number of works, particularly *Commentary on Averroes' Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction*, ed. and trans. Kalman P. Bland (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1982); *Be'ur le-Sefer Moreh Nevukhim*, ed. Jacob Goldenthal (Vienna: n.p., 1852); *Ma'amar bi-Shlemut ha-Nefesh*, ed. Alfred L. Ivry (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences, 1977); *Commentary on Ibn Tufayl's Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*. For studies of Narboni's approach to human perfect and conjunction, see Alfred L. Ivry, “Moses of Narbonne's *Treatise on the Perfection of the Soul*: A Methodological and Conceptual Analysis,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 57 (1967): 271-297; Gitit Holzman, “Seclusion, Knowledge and Conjunction in the Thought of R. Moshe Narboni,” *Kabbalah* 7 (2002): 111-173 (Heb.).

109 Crescas completed his magnum opus, *The Light of the Lord*, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, around 1410.

necessary for political-religious reasons rather than as theoretical truths. Hence even those who were convinced of the superiority of prophetic knowledge over that of the philosophers did not necessarily favor all prophetic doctrines as literally understood. Moreover, some even entertained the possibility that the prophets at times err in scientific matters. The approaches of the Jewish philosophers certainly varied, as we have seen, yet in the final analysis they shared the same basic assumption regarding the origin of prophecy, and they rooted their views in the same set of sources. With Crescas, the *philosophic* picture changes dramatically and is rooted more firmly in fundamental religious tenets. While he does not entirely abandon the naturalistic approach of the philosophers and employs it as the starting point for his own thought, he nonetheless sees God as the immediate agent of the content of the prophetic message, even though it most often reaches the prophet through an intermediary. The superiority of the prophet over the philosopher in their knowledge in fact reflects the superiority of the knowledge communicated by God to knowledge that is known by natural means. This, however, is a different story.¹¹⁰

110 For a discussion of Crescas' theory of prophecy, see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 425-485.



The Prophecy of Moses in Medieval Jewish Provençal Philosophy: Natural or Supernatural?

Introduction

Maimonides opens chapter thirty-nine of the second part of the *Guide of the Perplexed* with the following assertion:

After we have spoken of the quiddity of prophecy, have made known its true reality, and have made it clear that the prophecy of Moses our Master is different from that of the others, we shall say that the call to the Law followed necessarily from that apprehension alone. For nothing similar to the call addressed to us by Moses our Master has been made before him by any one of those we know who lived in the time between Adam and him; nor was a call similar to that one made by one of the prophets after him. Correspondingly it is a fundamental principle of our Law that there will never be another Law. Hence, according to our opinion, there never has been a Law and there never will be a Law except the one that is the Law of Moses our Master. (378-379)¹

¹ All English translations of the *Guide* are taken from the translation of Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963). All other translations in this chapter are my own.

Maimonides juxtaposes the uniqueness of the Torah with the uniqueness of Mosaic prophecy, a point that he had already stressed in chapter thirty-five, while adding: “For to my mind the term ‘prophet’ used with reference to Moses and to the others is amphibolous” (367). That is to say, the essence of the prophecy of Moses in Maimonides’ view is different from that of all other prophets and they share only some secondary characteristics. Maimonides also reminds his readers of the four fundamental differences between Mosaic prophecy and other prophecies that he had elaborated upon in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* (the seventh article of faith in the introduction to the tenth chapter of tractate Sanhedrin, *Pereq Ḥeleq*) and in his *Mishneh Torah* (Laws of Principles of the Torah 7.6).² In addition, in chapter thirty-five Maimonides points to a connection between the uniqueness of Moses’ prophecy and the uniqueness of the miracles he performed by noting: “The same applies, in my opinion, to his miracles and to the miracles of

2 According to Maimonides, Moses’ intellect became divorced from its dependence on his bodily organs (it became a form of Separate Intellect), and he received his prophecy without the mediation of the angels. The “angels” in this context may allude to the Active Intellect and/or the imaginative faculty. In *Guide* 2.45, Maimonides mentions explicitly that the imagination was not involved in Moses’ prophecy, and most, if not all, of the differences between Moses’ prophecy and all other prophecies revolve around the activity of the imagination. Yet at least one of the differences can also be interpreted as indicating that the Active Intellect was not involved in his prophecy. This interpretation is reinforced by the eighth article of faith, which states that God communicated the Torah to Moses. There is little doubt that Maimonides wished to leave the impression upon his readers that Moses’ prophecy was supernatural, and that he received the Law directly from God. The question of whether this is Maimonides’ true view is tied to the question that stands at the heart of this chapter. See also above, chapter two. For a detailed study of Mosaic prophecy in Maimonides’ thought, see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), s.v. Maimonides on Moses and Mosaic Prophecy. For a study of the problem of whether Maimonides regarded prophecy in general as having a supernatural dimension, see Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas: Natural or Divine Prophecy,” *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 1-19. For a survey of different approaches to the prophecy of Moses in Jewish philosophy from R. Saadiah Gaon to Spinoza, see Howard Kreisel, “The Prophecy of Moses in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” in *Illuminating Moses: A History of Reception from Exodus to the Renaissance*, ed. Jane Beal (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 117-141.

others, for his miracles do not belong to the class of the miracles of the other prophets” (367).

The question that arises in light of Maimonides’ statements is: what is the precise relation between Moses’ prophetic apprehension, the miracles that he performed, and the Law that he transmitted? Did Moses’ special prophetic apprehension enable him to perform the miracles and to legislate the Law—and if so, these phenomena may be unique but they still do not deviate from the natural order—or are we dealing with three different characteristics associated with his prophecy whose common denominator is that they all are outside the boundaries of nature? That is to say, Moses perfected himself as far as humanly possible in accordance with the natural order, but the special apprehension he attained, the miracles he performed, and the Law he transmitted were all gifts bestowed upon him directly by God. God, and no other, should be regarded as the immediate cause of these phenomena. If this is the case, the conclusion to which one is drawn is that despite Maimonides’ emphasis on God’s governance of the world by way of the order of nature,³ in regard to all the phenomena associated with the prophecy of Moses, God suspends this order and establishes an immediate connection with an individual human being.

The problem of how to interpret Maimonides on the issue of whether God can exercise acts of volition vis-à-vis historical individuals arises frequently in the interpretation of the *Guide*, particularly in the modern period. It is well known that Maimonides depicts Moses from the perspective of two different viewpoints that merge from time to time. On one hand, he sees in Moses the exemplar of human perfection, the model for all who strive for perfection, whether in the area of intellectual apprehension or in the area of governance. In order to attain this perfection, Moses had to travel the same path that all others have to travel. He also represents the outer limits of human perfection, the point from which no human being by nature is capable of further advancing. The human dimension of this perfection finds its expression in the fact that even after having attained perfection, he was not able

3 See *Guide* 2.4-12.

to overcome entirely the potential to sin. According to Maimonides, Moses experienced anger at the waters of Meribah, and according to his position in *Guide* 1.54, every experience of anger stems from a character defect, whether the anger is justified or not.⁴ Overall, Moses was not able to sever completely his intellect from its ties to matter, in order to become a separate intellect already in his lifetime. In accord with an image borrowed from Islamic thought that is presented by Maimonides in *Eight Chapters*, 7, there remained a single veil (*ḥijāb*) shrouding Moses' apprehension of God—namely, the human intellect that is not separate from matter.⁵

On the other hand, Maimonides treats Moses as a completely supernatural phenomenon. Moses was able to rent every veil during his lifetime and his intellect was transformed into a Separate Intellect. Consequent upon attaining this degree he attained a unique prophecy that was bestowed upon him directly by God without any intermediary, not even the Active Intellect that serves as an intermediary in all other instances of prophecy.⁶ God created the miracles announced by Moses, the like of which were never seen before or afterwards. God also communicated His messages to Moses via an audible voice, which at Sinai was also heard by all of Israel in order to verify his mission. To Moses, and to him alone, God, and no other, dictated the divine Law word for word. In short, whenever the divinity of the Law is at the heart of Maimonides' discussion, all the phenomena associated with Mosaic prophecy are treated as supernatural ones that are outside the boundary of human striving. Whenever the focus turns to human perfection, Moses is treated as the one who in a natural manner attained the limits of this perfection and thus serves as its ultimate representative.

4 In *Eight Chapters*, 1 Maimonides charges Moses with unjustified anger, which clearly reflects a character defect. In the *Guide*, however, he adopts a more extreme position. Even when anger is justified, the perfect individual must overcome all internal feelings of anger, while pretending to be angry when the situation calls for it.

5 See Kreisler, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea*, 181. On the term *ḥijāb* in Maimonides' thought, see *ibid.*, 173-174.

6 See in particular the seventh and eighth principles of faith at the end of the *Introduction to Pereq Ḥeleg*; cf. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 7.6.

There is no reason to doubt the fact that according to Maimonides, Moses attained perfection in the area of theoretical knowledge, and consequently, perfection in the area of governance, in accordance with the Platonic model. This type of governance is patterned after God's governance of the world. On this issue, the controversies among Maimonides' interpreters focus on determining the limits he places on human intellectual apprehension, an issue that has important ramifications for the possibility of human immortality in his thought,⁷ and the relation between a life of *theoria* and a life of *praxis*. More fundamental to an understanding of Maimonides' thought is the problem of how to interpret the figure of Moses as an individual who merited the occurrence of supernatural phenomena on his behalf, which appear to indicate God's personal involvement in history. Was the Deity in fact their immediate cause, or did Moses himself work seemingly supernatural activities, as well as legislate the Torah, on the basis of the level of intellectual perfection he attained?⁸

In this chapter I would like to focus on some of the philosophers from Southern France who were profoundly influenced by Maimonides and how they viewed Moses—his perfection and the supernatural phenomena that Maimonides associates with his prophecy. The philosophers are Levi ben Avraham, who lived in the second half of the thirteenth century and composed the encyclopedia of the sciences and

7 This controversy centered primarily on the interpretation of Shlomo Pines's interpretation of Maimonides' position in his article, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82-109. Pines's interpretation was challenged by Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge," *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992-93): 49-103. See also Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics," in his *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 60-129, and Howard Kreisel *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 137-147, 311-313.

8 I discussed the central issue of how to interpret the nature of God's activity in Maimonides' thought, as well as the problem whether Moses was secretly regarded by him as the immediate legislator of the Torah, in a number of previous studies. See, for example, "Moses Maimonides," in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1997), 245-280. See also *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 6-16.

Judaism entitled *Livyat H̄en*;⁹ and three philosophers who lived in the first half of the fourteenth century: Nissim of Marseille, the author of a philosophic Torah commentary, *Ma'aseh Nissim*;¹⁰ Joseph Ibn Kaspi, who in several of his exegetical works deals with different aspects of the prophecy of Moses, most notably in his *Tirat Kesef* (*Sefer ha-Sod*);¹¹ and Gersonides, who deals with this subject in his philosophic treatise *The Wars of the Lord*, and more extensively in his subsequent *Commentary on the Torah*. The rejection of the naturalistic approach to Moses' prophecy can be found not only among the opponents of philosophy in Provence but also among some of its proponents, as we shall see from Kalonymos ben Kalonymos' critique of Ibn Kaspi's position. Finally, I will turn to the issue of the voice heard at Sinai as well as the one heard by Moses in the tabernacle and examine how Maimonides and his followers in Provence understood these apparently supernatural phenomena, which do not easily lend themselves to naturalistic explanations. In an appendix to the chapter, I will bring some additional support to the view that Maimonides viewed Moses, and not God, as the immediate agent of the miracles associated with his prophecy.

Levi ben Avraham

A Jewish thinker prior to Maimonides hinted to the integral connection between the prophecy of Moses and the miracles he performed in a short but highly significant comment. I am referring to the twelfth-century biblical exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra, who in his commentary on Numbers 20:8—which speaks of God's command to Moses to talk to the rock and bring forth water—writes: “Know that when the part (*ba-beleq*) knows the All (or, everything, *ba-kol*), he conjoins with the All, and creates in everything signs and miracles.” Ibn Ezra's comment, which suggests a naturalistic model for understanding the miracles

9 For a study of this thinker and his encyclopedia, see above, chapter 5.

10 For a study of this thinker and his treatise, see above, chapter 6.

11 Ibn Kaspi deals also with aspects of this topic in *Menorat Kesef*, *Metsaref la-Kesef*, and in his two commentaries on the *Guide*: *'Amudei Kesef* and *Maskiyot Kesef*. For a description of Ibn Kaspi's treatises, see Hannah Kasher's introduction to her edition of Ibn Kaspi's *Shulhan Kesef* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zevi Institute, 1996), 11-53 (Heb.).

performed by Moses, was well known to the philosophers of Provence.¹² According to this view, God is not the immediate cause of these miraculous events; Moses himself performed them by virtue of the special apprehension he received while in a state of conjunction with God.¹³ Ibn Ezra goes on to explain that Moses at first did not succeed in drawing water from the rock at Meribah, since “the part (*ba-ḥeleq*) remained a part”—that is to say, because of his quarrel with the Israelites he did not succeed in immediately attaining the state of conjunction and “becoming universal (*kelali*),” which would have enabled him to perform the miracle without a flaw. In his initial attempt to bring forth water, Moses’ intellect remained incapable of affecting that which is outside the body to which it is attached, and did not become a universal intellect capable of influencing all entities on earth.

Levi, who was well aware of Ibn Ezra’s approach, deals with Moses in a number of chapters belonging to the first treatise (“The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah”) in the second part of *Livyat Hen*.¹⁴ In his discussion of miracles in the second treatise, “The Secrets of the Faith,” he presents a number of interpretations that shed further light on this topic.¹⁵ Seldom does Levi content himself with a single

12 For a study of Ibn Ezra’s approach to miracles and its influence on subsequent Jewish thinkers, see Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Anthropological Theory of Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge MA: Harvard University, 1984), 231-272. See also Howard Kreisel, “Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 75 (1984): 106-114. Ibn Ezra was not the only Jewish thinker prior to Maimonides to view the prophet himself as the agent of miracles. Abraham Ibn Daud too presents this view based on Avicenna’s approach; See *Emunah Ramah*, ed. Samuel Weil (Frankfurt, 1852), 2.5.1, 73. In his treatise, Ibn Daud deals extensively with the subject of prophecy in general and that of Moses in particular. For a study of this topic in his thought, see T. A. M. Fontaine, *In Defence of Judaism: Abraham Ibn Daud* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1990), 137-166.

13 I do not think that Ibn Ezra is referring to a state of unification with God, but rather a state in which he joins the world of the angels that stands immediately below the level of God in the hierarchy of existence. For Ibn Ezra’s description of the world of the angels, see in particular his commentary on Exodus 3:15.

14 See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007), especially chaps. 33-34 (Heb.).

15 See Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

interpretation of the issues he raises; he generally brings a host of interpretations, not all of them in harmony with each other. At times he determines which interpretation is the correct one and at times he leaves the choice to the reader. Thus one should not expect a consistent approach to our subject, but to a variety of possible interpretations. What is noteworthy are some of the possibilities that this thirteenth-century thinker permits himself to present explicitly to his Jewish audience. Levi deals at length with a good number of issues related to Moses and his prophecy—e.g., the private revelation to Moses at Sinai in the cleft of the rock, the sin of Moses, and Moses' speech impediment. In this chapter, I will focus only upon the question of the relation between Moses' perfection, his prophecy, and the miracles he performed.

Levi agrees with the view that Moses achieved human perfection in a naturalistic manner. He was born with a perfect temperament and completed his studies of all of the sciences.¹⁶ In his interpretation of the import of the verse: *Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three when they made their demand on Pharaoh* (Exodus 7:7), Levi writes: "That is to say, they had much time and many years to learn and perfect their souls by knowledge of all the sciences. In addition, at this age the imaginative faculty is weak in consequence of the weakening of one's physical faculties. This enabled him [Moses] to prophesy without the use of the imaginative faculty, *between the two cherubs* [Exodus 25:22]."¹⁷ Levi interprets *between the two cherubs* as a metaphor signifying the emanation of the Active Intellect directly upon the intellect of Moses without the mediation of the imaginative faculty.¹⁸ This attainment is

Press, 2014), especially chaps. 12-13 (Heb.).

16 On the relation of one's natural temperament and the learning of the sciences, see *Guide* 1.34 (the fourth cause that prevents instruction in the divine science).

17 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 123, 733.

18 This interpretation is based upon Maimonides' remarks toward the end of *Guide* 2.45. According to Levi, the cherub is a metaphor for the intellect—whether the Active Intellect or the human intellect; see *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 224. He also brings an additional interpretation of this verse: "In order that one should not err in thinking that the speech went out from the figure of the cherub, and that one should not treat it as a divinity, the story comes to tell us that Moses heard the voice *between the two cherubs*, not from the cherubs themselves" (589);

definitely unique in Levi's view, but not one that breaches the boundary of nature, as he writes: "I have already explained that Moses was the most exceptional member of the human species and his intellectual apprehension was of the utmost level of human apprehension."¹⁹ In other words: "Moses apprehended all that is possible for a human being to apprehend, and he conjoined with the angels [Active Intellect]. Consequently it is said: *Moses approached the thick cloud where God [Elohim] was* [Exodus 20:18], the name *Elohim* alluding to the angels."²⁰

According to Levi's descriptions of the prophecy of Moses, one can detect a progression in Moses' prophetic attainment, insofar as the first prophetic experience of his, the vision of the burning bush, was more "corporeal" than his prophetic experience at Sinai. Levi writes:

For sixty years, Moses was a corporeal being, as we already saw, for it is said: *she hid him for three months* [Exodus 2:2]. This alludes to the three previous periods in a person's life, for it is said: *also from yesterday, also from the day before* [Exodus 4:10]. In the seventh decade [of a person's life] the darkness of matter departs, as it is said: *the cloud hid it [the glory of God] for six days and on the seventh day it called to Moses from the midst of the cloud* [Exodus 24:16]. This has the same meaning as: *God called to him from the midst of the bush* [Exodus 3:8], as we shall explain. However, *from the midst of the bush* indicates a more corporeal, unrefined vision than the one indicated by the words *from the midst of the cloud*, since the vision of the bush was the first one that he beheld.²¹

Levi echoes the view to which Maimonides alludes in *Guide* 3.45, where the latter writes: "Even in the case of Moses our Master, his prophetic

cf. *Guide* 3.45. For a study of different interpretations of this verse among Maimonides' followers, see Esti Eisenmann, "'From Above the Covering of the Ark, from Between the Two Cherubim': A Study of Jewish Philosophical Interpretation," in *Moses the Man: Master of the Prophets*, ed. Moshe Hallamish, Hannah Kasher, and Hanokh Ben-Pazi (Ramat-Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2010), 101-113 (Heb.).

19 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 743.

20 *Ibid.*, 270. For a discussion of the problem of conjunction of the human intellect with the Active Intellect in Maimonides' thought, see the studies mentioned above in note 7. For the Arabic philosophical background of this problem, see Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on the Intellect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

21 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 733.

mission is inaugurated through an angel: *And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord in the heart of fire [Exodus 3:2]*” (576). The “angel” in this context appears to represent the imaginative faculty. Only afterward did Moses reach the level that he was able to dispense with this faculty in the attainment of prophecy.²² Levi, again following Maimonides’ lead, sees in the vexation experienced by Moses as a result of the complaints of the Israelites an impairment to the acquisition of prophecy, as can be seen from his sin at the waters of Meribah, where he has to hit the rock twice in order to bring forth water.²³

The depiction of Moses’ prophecy till this point is a unique one that nevertheless does not breach the boundaries of the impersonal natural order. Moreover, Levi is clear on the point that Moses’ prophecy was a result of conjunction with the Active Intellect, as is the case with the other prophets. While Maimonides frames his comments in a way that can be interpreted that Moses received his prophecy directly from God, Levi appears to reject this possibility. The characteristic distinguishing Moses’ prophecy from all others is the purely intellectual nature of his prophecy, without the involvement of the imagination.

22 I will return to this passage in the appendix to the chapter. Jacob Levinger was of the opinion that Maimonides’ esoteric teaching on this issue is that even at Mount Sinai Moses’ prophecy was by way of the imaginative faculty, and hence there was no categorical difference between the nature of his prophecy and that of the other prophets; see Jacob Levinger, *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989), 29-38 (Heb.). For a study of fourteenth-century Jewish philosophers who also ascribed an imaginative element to Moses’ prophecy, see Dov Schwartz, “Mosaic Prophecy in the Writings of a Fourteenth Century Jewish Neoplatonist Circle,” *Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 (1992): 97-110. My own view is that Maimonides held that Moses’ prophetic experience at Sinai was a purely intellectual one focusing on the order of existence, but that his imagination came into play in “translating” this knowledge into a perfect legislation; see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 283-284.

23 See Levi’s extensive discussion of this story in *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 744-753. Levi insists that Moses was supposed to hit the rock, and for this reason was commanded to take his staff with him, but due to his vexation with the nation he was not able to bring forth water immediately by a single stroke. Compare to Maimonides’ comment in *Guide* 2.36, where he maintains that the vexation experienced by Moses due to the episode of the spies resulted in prophetic revelation not coming to him “in the way that revelation used to come before, because—seeing the enormity of their crime—he suffered greatly because of this matter” (372-373).

Yet Levi also brings a number of interpretations that suggest the opposite conclusion, and that he in fact sees God as the immediate cause of Moses' unique prophecy. Moreover, Levi's interpretations of phenomena mentioned in the Torah that appear to be outside the boundaries of nature do not always reflect a naturalistic approach. It is possible that we are dealing in these cases with an esoteric level to his writing, given the religious sensitivity of the issues involved. Levi presents interpretations that ascribe to God the ability to act directly and miraculously in history in order to hide his view that all events should be understood in a manner that is in harmony with the workings of the natural order. One, however, should not reject the possibility that Levi in fact did not reach a definitive conclusion on this issue and leaves the matter open. In any case, the fact that he introduced naturalistic explanations in interpreting these events in a treatise intended for a general Jewish audience, and it appears that his tendency is to favor these interpretations, is highly significant.

The tendency to understand Moses' prophecy in accordance with a naturalistic model, while not ruling out the alternate possibility, finds its expression in other issues associated with this prophecy. In regard to the Torah's statement that Moses neither ate bread nor drank water during the forty days he was on Mount Sinai,²⁴ Levi offers two explanations: "Due to the strength of his conjunction with God and his soul's passion for knowledge, a supernal power emanated upon him which strengthened his body, fortified his disposition, and preserved him without food or drink during this period. An alternate explanation [is that] this was by way of a miracle."²⁵ According to the first explanation, the attainment of conjunction naturally resulted in the body being preserved without the necessity for the intake of nourishment in order to maintain it, and one need not ascribe this phenomenon to the miracle working ability of God. Levi's interpretation suggests that the intellect in this state achieves independence from the body and can function

24 See Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 9:9.

25 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 743.

without being sustained by it,²⁶ while at the same time the body attains a static state in which it does not deteriorate. Alternately, the notion that this was a miraculous occurrence due to God's direct involvement is also a possible explanation in his view.

As for Moses' miracles, Levi writes: "God taught the prophet in a general way how to change nature and create miracles that He decreed should be performed by him [the prophet], as Ibn Ezra maintained: 'When the part knows the All, he conjoins with the All, and creates signs and miracles' [Commentary on Numbers 20:8]."²⁷ Levi points to the connection between the miracles performed by Moses and his knowledge of the Tetragrammaton:

We already explained that the Tetragrammaton refers only to the One who is the origin of all existents. . . . Only the Necessary Existent is capable of changing nature, insofar as it is the first cause of nature, as it is said [of Him]: *who alone makes miracles* [Psalms 72:18]. Consequently it is said that [this name] refers to His quality of mercy, for it is fitting that the shepherd governs, watches over, and is compassionate. But *Elohim* refers to the quality of judgment, for the judge must engage in judgment. Consequently it is said: *And my name the Tetragrammaton I did not inform them* [Exodus 6:3], for only by this name can one create miracles. . . . Through Moses God began to perform miracles in the world, and he was the first of the prophets who was sent to the nation with a mission.²⁸

Levi in this passage does not claim that Moses worked the miracles, rather God did. Yet one can find an allusion to the idea that Moses was their immediate agent in Levi's subsequent comments:

Some of the signs were performed by Aaron, because he was subtler in bringing them about and he understood their natural component. In addition, in the change of agents the effects change. Aaron also knew how to determine the moment that the plagues will come.

26 Compare the explanation offered by Moses Ibn Tibbon in his *Sefer Pe'ah*, 3 (*The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, and Avraham Israel [Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010], 105-6 [Heb.]).

27 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith*, 94.

28 *Ibid.*, 95. As for the notion that Moses was the first to issue a call to others in the name of God by virtue of his prophecy, see *Guide* 2.39.

Perhaps these things were accomplished with the help of astral forces, and Aaron knew how to determine the appropriate times, and he would choose them in accordance with the word of God.²⁹

Aaron, in other words, was an adept in astrology and it is precisely the knowledge of the effects of the astral forces and how to manipulate them that enabled him to bring about some of the plagues at the times that he did.³⁰ Similarly, Moses was able to perform miracles as a result of his unique knowledge of the order of existence that he attained by way of prophecy. This can be inferred from Levi's treatment of the miracle of the "opening up of the mouth of the earth" that swallowed up the followers of Korah—one of the miracles God created at the end of the sixth day, according to Mishnah Avot 5.6:

"The opening up of the mouth of the earth"—this designates an earthquake. The sign lies in God informing Moses the time that it was to take place. Each instance of this phenomenon occurred when needed. Also belonging to this category is what they [the Sages] said: "The wall of Jericho that was swallowed up where it stood" [BT Berakhot 54a], similar to what happens in the collapsing of towns and the sinking of city-states.³¹

One may interpret Levi as maintaining that God purposefully implanted in the order earthquakes at specific times and places in order to aid Israel when the proper time came. Yet he appears to be hinting to the fact that earthquakes are natural occurrences. By knowing when and where they occur based on a complete knowledge of the natural order, the prophet can utilize them for his purposes, as in the case of the ground swallowing up Korah or the earthquake that brought down the walls of Jericho.³²

29 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith*, 95.

30 For a study of approaches to astrology among medieval Jewish thinkers, see Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) (Heb.); see especially his treatment of Levi on pages 245-254.

31 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith*, 95.

32 One may further argue that the latter earthquake was hastened by the command to march around the city seven times and then sound the trumpets. Levi, however, prefers a symbolic reason for this action—namely, to show that Israel is not ruled by the seven planets. See *ibid.*, 107.

As in the case of Aaron, Moses too was an expert in astrology, a view that Levi tries to show is attested to also in rabbinic midrash:

Since He saw that the nativity of Moses was weaker than the constellation of Amaleq, and if Moses fought against them he would lose—and perhaps this is what is alluded to in saying: *the hands of Moses were heavy* [Exodus 17.12]—and Joshua’s constellation was stronger than his, therefore He commanded Joshua to fight Amaleq. Moses chose special hours by way of prophecy, and he would raise then up his hands by the word of God, as it is indicated in the *Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer*: “*And his hands were steady* [ibid.]—Amaleq came upon them in accordance with their astrological decree. Moses came, halted the sun and the moon and mixed up their hours, as it is said: *The sun and the moon stood still in their habitation* [Habakkuk 3:11], and it is written: *and lifted up his hands on high*” [ibid., 10].³³ “Came upon them in accordance with their astrological decree”—that is to say, they saw that Israel departed [Egypt] under the influence of an evil star, thus they came upon them. For if this is not the case, what need was there to “mix up the hours”? After all, “Israel is not under the influence of the constellations” (BT Shabbat 156a). Furthermore, what was the purpose of halting the moon?³⁴ The meaning of: *and Aaron and Hur supported his hands* [Exodus 17:12], is that they aided him by what they knew of this subject. . . .³⁵ In the *Midrash of Psalms*: “*Pick some men for us* [ibid., 9]—from those born on the first [of] Adar.” The reason for this is that the moon then enters into the constellation of Aquarius, which is the constellation of Israel. It appears that he also desired that the ascending constellation be Aquarius at the time of the new moon in order that the particular should agree with the generality.³⁶ Even though Moses at first experienced difficulties in his study of the mathematical sciences due to his natural temperament, God at the end enabled him to comprehend them. Or perhaps he was an expert only in the area of astrology.³⁷

33 This quotation does not appear in our editions of the *Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer*, but it appears in *Tanḥuma*, BeShalah, 28.

34 One may argue that the reason to halt the sun in its orbit was to give the Israelites more hours of daylight to fight Amaleq, but Levi shows that astrological considerations were the reason for this action, since Moses halted also the moon.

35 Levi cites a similar midrash found in *Tanḥuma*, Tetsaveh, 9.

36 That is to say, that the constellation of each of the warriors will be the same as the ascending constellation at the time of the new moon, and this would reinforce their strength.

37 *Livyat Ḥen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 771-2.

While in this passage Levi speaks at first as though the specific commands come directly from God, it is clear from the continuation of his remarks that Moses determined what actions were to be taken based on his astrological knowledge, and that he conferred with Aaron and Hur, who were also experts in this field.

There are miracles that Levi apparently rejects any attempt to explain in a naturalistic manner, such as the parting of the Sea of Reeds: “God chose for the parting of the sea a time of moderate temperature, and not a time of great coldness and dreadful frost, in order not to give the heretics an opening to claim that this was a natural event, since the intensity of the coldness froze the water.”³⁸ Even in this case, Levi may have still believed that there was a natural reason for the event and Moses was able to predict its occurrence, but he did not want to reveal this view given the significance of this miracle. Otherwise, it is hard to explain why he is so persistent in presenting naturalistic interpretations for many of the other biblical miracles.

The most crucial question that remains is whether Levi held that Moses himself was the author of the Torah as a result of the level of prophecy that he attained. It is hardly surprising that Levi ascribes the Torah to the immediate agency of God in his discussion of the topic. Nevertheless, there are passages that may allude to a different view on this issue. He writes, for example: “Some of the stories were written by Moses in an allegoric manner and he designed them as parables by the word of God [literally, the mouth of God, *‘al pei HaShem*] because of necessity.”³⁹ Levi attempts to solve the problem how the Torah can contain parables if Moses’ prophecy did not involve the imaginative faculty. He does not explain what he means, however, by the phrase “by the word of God.” Does he in fact maintain that God commanded Moses to write these stories exactly as He dictated them, and hence Moses’ imagination was not involved, or is he hinting at the view that Moses himself created the parables because he understood the need to convey to the nation the truths he received in prophecy in this manner, and this understanding is what Levi alludes to when he speaks

38 *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith*, 98.

39 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 224.

of “the word of God”? As we shall see below, Levi’s approach to the “voice” of God may throw some added light on this issue.

Nissim of Marseille

Following the Maimonidean tradition, Nissim treats Moses as an individual who attained ultimate human perfection and conjoined with the Active Intellect, thereby meriting a prophecy that involved his intellect alone without the use of his imagination.⁴⁰ It is this unique attainment that enabled him to govern the Israelites in a perfect manner. While Maimonides, followed by Levi ben Avraham, leaves the question of the precise relationship between Moses’ perfection and the supernatural phenomena associated with his prophecy at least in part open, Nissim’s stance on this issue lacks very little if any ambiguity. Moses’ perfection enabled him to create the miracles and lay down a law that alone may be considered divine.

Nissim describes Moses’ perfection as follows:

Moses, of blessed memory, actualized his intellect, till he was always with God. God illuminated him by way of a radiant prism (*aspaqlariyah me’irah*), till the light of his intellect shone. He commanded what he commanded and admonished what he admonished, and he gave us a law and commandments by virtue of the good hand of his Lord upon him, and in accordance with His command. He induced the multitude to follow it by miracles and promises of good fortune, awe inspiring miracles and terrible punishments. There remained no perfection or what brings it about according to the intellect that he had not taught and commanded us. He reached the pinnacle of God’s purpose in the creation of humanity. He aspired to every perfection that he could determine on the basis of divine science in order to perfect the individual and protect him from the evils that human beings inflict upon each other, and also those evils that they inflict upon themselves as a result of bad choices.⁴¹

40 Nissim devotes chapter 12 of his treatise to a discussion of the prophecy of Moses in relation to that of all other prophets. He also discusses Moses’ prophecy extensively throughout his work.

41 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 100.

Nissim shows in this passage the integral relation between intellectual perfection, culminating in mastery of the divine science (metaphysics), and perfect governance, including the laying down of an ideal law that will lead others to perfection and minimize the evils they inflict on each other and on themselves. Not only are Maimonides' views on human perfection and the purpose of the divine Law very much evident in this passage,⁴² but just as striking is its similarity to Alfarabi's description of the supreme lawgiver in his *The Political Regime*,⁴³ which heavily influenced Maimonides' thought.⁴⁴ Perhaps most astounding is the fact that Nissim in this passage comes close to indicating explicitly that Moses himself was the immediate author of the Law, and God only the remote cause, a position that is echoed even more explicitly in other passages of his work, as we have seen, and moreover, treated as the esoteric view of the Sages.⁴⁵

In keeping with his view that all miracles can be explained in a manner that is in harmony with the natural order,⁴⁶ Nissim explains those performed by Moses. All of them consisted either of rare natural phenomena that Moses was able to foresee and utilize for his purposes, or they were phenomena that do not occur naturally but Moses acquired the scientific knowledge that enabled him to bring them about. Many of the explanations he borrowed from Levi's encyclopedia, such as the earthquake foreseen by Moses and utilized to destroy the followers of Korah, or his striking the rock to release the water which stood underneath it.⁴⁷ All of the plagues occurring in Egypt are given a naturalistic

42 See, in particular, Maimonides' description of the purpose of the divine Law in *Guide* 3.27, as well as his discussion of evil in 3.12.

43 See the quote brought above in chapter 2, 25-26.

44 See chapter 2, note 24. Nissim nowhere in his treatise cites explicitly from *The Political Regime*, also known as *The Principles of Existents*, which was translated into Hebrew by Moses Ibn Tibbon and with which he may well have been acquainted. He does quote, however, from a different work of Alfarabi, *The Classification of the Sciences*; see *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 70-71.

45 See above, chapter 6, 172-173.

46 See above, chapter 6, 190-192. As noted in this chapter, there are passages in which Nissim attacks the view that the Torah was not given to Israel by God, but this stance does not appear to represent his private view on the subject and is presented for religious reasons.

47 See *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 416-418, 422-423.

explanation, including the death of the first born,⁴⁸ and several naturalistic explanations are proffered for the splitting of the Sea of Reeds.⁴⁹

No medieval Jewish philosopher who remained faithful to Jewish tradition came as close as Nissim in presenting such a radical naturalistic position in such an open manner. The Torah in Nissim's view is a divine law not because it came directly from God but because it was legislated by the individual who attained the highest possible level of human perfection, and guided its adherents towards this perfection in an optimum manner. Nissim understands the necessity of teaching the masses that God is the immediate author of the Torah, and even labeling this belief a principle of faith,⁵⁰ in order to insure their obedience. Yet he clearly regards this belief as a noble lie, or what was termed by Maimonides a "necessary belief,"⁵¹ in keeping with the Platonic political tradition

Joseph Ibn Kaspi and the Critique by Kalonymos ben Kalonymos

Ibn Kaspi also appears to hold the view that Moses himself brought about the miracles and laid down the Law as a result of the perfection he attained, though he is careful not to make these points too explicit.⁵² Kalonymos, however, discerned from Ibn Kaspi's remarks in *Tirat Kesef* (*Sefer ha-Sod*) that this was in fact his view and wrote a scathing

48 Ibid., 309-317.

49 Ibid., 322. For some of these explanations see chapter 6, 202-203.

50 Ibid., 159-160.

51 See *Guide* 3.28. Maimonides distinguished these beliefs from "correct beliefs," for they are clearly false when understood literally, such as God is violently angry at those who are unjust and He slays them.

52 For a discussion of the prophecy of Moses in the thought of Ibn Kaspi, see Barry Mesch, *Studies in Joseph Ibn Caspi* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 61-76. Mesch nicely summarizes Ibn Kaspi's view of Moses' perfection and its natural aspects. Moreover, Mesch shows that Ibn Kaspi interprets Maimonides as agreeing with Aristotle that the world is without beginning and God possesses no personal will (ibid., 97-100). For a discussion of Ibn Kaspi's approach to miracles, see Basil Herring's introduction to his edition of Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *Gevi'a Kesef* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982), 99-122.

critique against him.⁵³ One may say that Kalonymos brought to light what Ibn Kaspi wanted to leave obscure. In his explanation of Proverbs 30, Ibn Kaspi writes in the first chapter of his work:

I am more brutish than a man [Proverbs 30:2]. He means to say by this—than what is in the nature of the intellect of a person to grasp.⁵⁴ We entertain no doubt that Moses our Master reached this final end and his actions prove it. Solomon spoke of Moses' marvelous actions and said: *Who has ascended up to heaven* etc. [ibid., 4]. In general, he spoke of the loftiest kinds of marvelous actions Moses performed, which included those that were impossible by nature Undoubtedly he acted upon the wind, and in general upon the element of air, also upon the element of water, in accordance with his will, most of these activities being impossible for us.⁵⁵

Ibn Kaspi subsequently remarks:

In general, the character of the action teaches the character of the agent. Therefore one who understands all of our holy Torah believes that Moses our Master, who was the foremost prophet, received it from God or from the heavens, both are the same. He undoubtedly reached the ultimate point of the perfection of the intellect of the human species, and this point is the ultimate final perfection of the prophetic perfection. When he reached this point, God, who is completely intellect, transmitted to him His holy Torah.⁵⁶

Kalonymos infers from Ibn Kaspi's remarks, "that Moses our Master, since he apprehended all of the existents completely, worked upon the elements as he willed, and therefore his actions were so marvelous. This general ability does not exist in the other individuals of the

53 See Kalonymos ben Kalonymos, *Ha-Teshuvah le-Yosef Kaspi (Sendschreiben an Joseph Kaspi)*, ed. Joseph Perles (Munich, 1879).

54 In other words, Solomon indicates that he did not realize the full intellectual potential of what the ideal human being is capable of realizing, hence he still is characterized by his animal nature.

55 Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *Tirat Kesef*, in *Mishneh Kesef*, vol. 1, ed. Isaac Last (Pressburg, 1905), 3. Compare Ibn Kaspi's second commentary on Proverbs that appears in Joseph Ibn Kaspi, *'Asarah Kelei Kesef*, vol. 1, ed. Isaac Last (Pressburg, 1903), 126-127.

56 *Tirat Kesef*, 4.

species, only in the one who reached the final level possible for the species, such as Moses our Master.”⁵⁷

Kalonymos interprets Ibn Kaspi’s remarks in accordance with two different explanations as to how a prophet is capable of working miracles. The first he attributes to Avicenna. The soul of the prophet is transformed into a type of world soul as a result of his conjunction with the Active Intellect, and through his power of representation while in this state he can work upon the elements as he wills. Kalonymos identifies this approach also with Ibn Ezra and admits that at one point even he and his teachers accepted it.⁵⁸ The second explanation is the one he feels that Ibn Kaspi himself holds. The prophet knows how to bring about miracles on the basis of the perfect scientific knowledge he has acquired of the world.

Kalonymos rejects both explanations, the first for reasons that, as he indicates, were brought by Averroes in his *Incoherence of the Incoherence* against the notion that the power of representation can bring about changes such as an entity being transformed from one species to another. There are only two possible ways for existents to change from one species to another: either their form emanates from the Active Intellect, as was believed by the later philosophers—a reference to Alfarabi and Avicenna—or the motion of the heavenly bodies completes the process.⁵⁹ In the latter case, there is no role for representation at all. Even if we maintain that the Active Intellect bestows the forms, it is only capable of acting when the heavenly motions prepare matter to receive a given form. The Active Intellect works only in accordance with nature, and God alone can change the heavenly motions.⁶⁰

57 *Ha-Teshuvah le-Yosef Kaspi*, 4.

58 *Ibid.* For a discussion of Avicenna’s theory of miracles and its influence on medieval Jewish philosophy, see Ravitzky, “The Anthropological Theory of Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” 323-361. Avicenna presents this theory in *Remarks and Admonitions*; see Shams Inati (trans.), *Ibn Sina and Mysticism—Remarks and Admonitions; Part Four* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1996), 105-107. See also below in the appendix to this chapter.

59 This is a reference to Aristotle’s notion that human beings are born from the other human beings and the sun; see *On the Generation of Animals* 2.3, 737a.

60 Kalonymos, *Ha-Teshuvah*, 4. Perles’ edition contains many faulty readings which I have emended in my summary and translation. Kalonymos’ argument is in

The second explanation, that superior knowledge of the world enables one to bring about these changes, is also rejected, again for reasons Kalonymos traces to Averroes. He argues that an infinite number of preparations are necessary to bring about a small change in nature and the human intellect is by nature incapable of discovering all of them. Kalonymos concludes in the name of Averroes:

When a prophet presents an activity impossible for man, even if it is possible in nature, it is sufficient proof of the divine prophetic spirit in him, in that he apprehends activities which speculation cannot indicate. When you examine the miracles whose veracity is indicated in the Law of Moses, the trustworthy prophet, you find them of this kind, as in the transformation of a rod into a serpent, and the splitting of the Sea of Reeds. There is no reason to assume that these things are conceptually impossible; rather, they are possible in nature, but impossible for all men except the prophet, since prophecy bears no relation to speculation.⁶¹

At first blush, Kalonymos' position appears similar to the one he is attacking, for even those he critiques agree that only in the state of conjunction is this special ability or knowledge attained. Yet the difference between the two positions becomes clearer in the continuation of the discussion. According to Kalonymos, God imparted to Moses knowledge of the specific miracles he was to bring about and Moses had

accordance with the principles of Islamic Aristotelian metaphysics. It does not, however, appear in the versions of the *Incoherence of the Incoherence* that have come down to us, neither in the Arabic (*Tabafot-at-Tabafot*, ed. Maurice Bouyges [Beyrouth: Imprimerie Catholique, 1930]), nor in the medieval Hebrew translation (MS Vatican 520). None contain the argument against the individual performing miracles by the power of representation. For Al-Ghazali's discussion of miracles and Averroes' response, see *Incoherence of the Incoherence (Tabafut al-Tabafut)*, trans. Simon Van Den Bergh (London: Luzac and Company, 1954), vol. 1, 316-333.

61 Kalonymos, *Ha-Teshuvah*, 5. This argument too is not found in our versions of the *Incoherence of the Incoherence*. While Averroes agrees that it is not in the power of man or the Active Intellect to transform existents instantaneously, he appears to place the limitation on God as well. See *Incoherence of the Incoherence*, 25ff., 332. Averroes, however, condemns the discussion of the principles of religion in order not to undermine them, because of the necessity of the virtues that religion inculcates for human existence. He concludes: "Of religious principles it must be said that they are divine things which surpass human understanding, but must be acknowledged although their causes are unknown" (322).

no choice in the matter.⁶² Rather than regard Moses as an active, free-willing agent, as is the case with his opponents, Kalonymos treats him as a passive instrument in carrying out the divine decree.

Kalonymos was inspired to write his response not only due to Ibn Kaspi's remarks in *Tirat Kesef* but also because of what Ibn Kaspi wrote to Kalonymos' teachers. The fact that Kalonymos at one point was attracted to this view also helps explain the fervor he feels in now attacking it, lest others succumb to its lure. He summarizes Ibn Kaspi's approach based on these two sources, as well as his critique of it, as follows: "I have no doubt that the Torah came from God not in the way you maintain, for the prophecy that reached Moses our Master is consequent upon the final perfection, and not that it is the final point of the final perfection."⁶³

There is no disagreement between Kalonymos and Ibn Kaspi regarding the fact that Moses attained the final perfection of the human species and that there is an integral connection between this unique perfection and Moses' miracles and the reception of the Torah. The controversy focuses on the role of God. Ibn Kaspi in Kalonymos' eyes adopts a completely naturalistic position, and leaves no room for any voluntary activity on the part of God. To Ibn Kaspi, human perfection exists on a continuum, and the one who reaches the final point of this continuum naturally attains the ability to perform miracles and lay down a perfect legislation. To Kalonymos, God chooses to perform the greatest of miracles and transmit the Torah only through the mediation of one who has reached the final point of perfection, but in the final analysis it is God who determines directly each of the miracles that takes place as well as each of the commandments of the divine Law, a view that echoes Maimonides' explicit remarks on the subject, disregarding the issue of whether he held an esoteric position.⁶⁴

62 Kalonymos, *Ha-Teshuvah*, 5.

63 *Ibid.*, 5

64 See, in particular, *Guide* 2.25. Moreover, Maimonides treats the belief in God's authorship of every work in the Torah as a principle of faith; see his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*, eighth principle.

Kalonymos appears to have discerned correctly Ibn Kaspi's secret position. Though there are passages in which Ibn Kaspi treats some of the miracles as supernatural activities performed by God, he nonetheless maintains that many of the miracles that are treated as supernatural occurrences are characterized so because of our ignorance of the natural causes that bring them about. Even Moses' miracles were possible in nature in his view, though he cannot explain how they were performed.⁶⁵ It is this radical naturalistic approach that appears to leave no room at all for personal divine volition that Kalonymos rejects despite his attraction to philosophy.

Ibn Kaspi's naturalistic approach to the phenomena associated with Mosaic prophecy perhaps finds its most explicit expression in his treatise *Gevi'a Kesef*. There he interprets the voice heard by Moses in the Tabernacle as referring to what he attained by way of the emanation to the intellect.

Notice how profusely he *spoke with him* [Numbers 7:89], which is an allusion to Moses himself. For where is God mentioned [in the verse] in order that it allude to Him? But Moses spoke with himself and his essence, which is his intellect, and the "voice" refers to intellectual emanation. All this is clear to the wise.⁶⁶

Even the Torah, Ibn Kaspi indicates in several passages in his treatise, was written by Moses as a result of his prophetic attainment, with God serving as the remote agent.⁶⁷

Levi Gersonides

While Levi ben Avraham, Nissim of Marseille and Joseph Ibn Kaspi view Moses as the perfect individual who by virtue of his intellectual attainment was capable of performing miracles, and it appears was even capable of legislating a divine law, Gersonides rejects this

65 See *Tirat Kesef*, 11ff., 135. In his esoteric commentary on the *Guide*, *Maskiyot Kesef*, Ibn Kaspi also appears to ascribe to Moses this ability, hence the descent of the Glory of God, which refers to the cloud, upon the Tabernacle is treated as a product of Moses' activity; see *Maskiyot Kesef*, 20-1, 29.

66 *Gevi'a Kesef*, 41.

67 *Ibid.*, 10, 13, 16.

approach. As in the case of his philosophic predecessors, he agrees that Moses in fact reached the highest level of human perfection and merited receiving a form of prophecy that involved solely the intellect without the mediation of the imagination.⁶⁸ In general, Gersonides accepts Maimonides' descriptions of Moses' perfection, with a number of changes due to his approach to the manner that prophecy is attained.⁶⁹ Moreover, Gersonides rejects the idea that the human being can reach a state of union with the Active Intellect, for he holds that it is impossible to attain complete knowledge of the world order that characterizes this transcendental intellect and is a condition for uniting with it.⁷⁰ Still, in his commentary on Numbers 12:8 he depicts Moses as coming very close to this level:

Due to their conjunction with matter, the other prophets apprehended from the order of existents as it exists in God only that part to which their thought was inclined. Together with this, Moses apprehended all that is possible for a person to apprehend from this conceptual order, and by means of this wondrous apprehension he conjoined with God and apprehended an aspect of His wondrous

68 See Gersonides' discussion of Mosaic prophecy in *The Wars of the Lord* 2.6 (trans. Seymour Feldman [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987], vol. 2, 57-59); see also his commentary on Numbers 12:8 (*Perushei Rabbag 'al HaTorah*, ed. Jacob Lev Levy [Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1998], vol. 4, 42-43). For a study of Mosaic prophecy in Gersonides' thought, see Menachem Kellner, "Maimonides and Gersonides on Mosaic Prophecy," *Speculum* 52 (1977): 62-79; and Kreisel, "The Prophecy of Moses in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," 129-133. For a discussion of Gersonides' approach to prophecy in general, see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 316-424.

69 For example, Gersonides adds the prophet's ability to "isolate" his intellect together with the imaginative faculty from the other faculties of the soul. On the idea of "isolation" (*hibbodedut*) in the philosophy of Gersonides, see Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Prophecy, Clairvoyance, and Dreams and the Concept of 'Hitbodedut' in Gersonides' Thought," *Daat* 39 (1997): 23-68 (Heb.). It should be noted that Gersonides presents a much more detailed, and it appears different, description of the roles of the Active Intellect and the faculties of the soul in the bestowal and reception of prophecy than does Maimonides. See *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 358-390.

70 "Conjunction" (*devekut*) in the writings of Gersonides does not indicate an ontological state, but the level of perfection of the intellect by virtue of which a person merits prophecy or miracles occurring on his behalf. For a study of this topic, see Seymour Feldman, "Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect," *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 99-120.

figure. This was due to the ease of the isolation of his intellect from the other faculties of the soul, till he was always with God and he was only able to break away from this conjunction with great difficulty, as we explained at the beginning of Exodus.⁷¹

Yet even in this source Gersonides rejects the possibility to grasp the Separate Intellects, *ipso facto* to grasp God, and he limits Moses' apprehension to the entire order of the material world.⁷²

While Gersonides sees an integral connection between Moses' perfection and the miracles that were performed through him, as well as his reception of the Torah, he does not view Moses as the agent of the miracles or the author of the Torah. In his discussion of miracles at the end of *The Wars of the Lord*, he brings a list of arguments to show that the Active Intellect is the immediate agent of the miracles, not God or the prophet himself.⁷³ The question of who is the immediate source of the Torah is not addressed by Gersonides in his philosophical treatise. In his *Commentary on the Torah*, he attributes the Torah and the miracles to God, but in keeping with his position in *The Wars of the Lord*, one should interpret him as viewing God as their remote cause, just as God is the remote cause of all that occurs in the world, and not their immediate cause. Should one then also attribute the legislation of the Torah to the Active Intellect? It would appear that this is the conclusion to which Gersonides' approach leads, with all the problems that attach to this position from both a religious and a philosophical

71 *Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, vol. 4, 42-43. Compare his commentary on Exodus 33:30: ". . . Till Moses became like a simple intellect and did not sense physical things" (*Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, vol. 2, 432). See also his commentary on Exodus 4:10. As opposed to Maimonides, though similar to the interpretation Maimonides attributes to Onqelos, Gersonides interprets the "face" of God as referring to the Separate Intellects; cf. *Guide* 1.37; 1.54.

72 *Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, vol. 2, 434 (commentary on Exodus 33:20).

73 *The Wars of the Lord* 6.2.10 (vol. 3, 474-486).

perspective.⁷⁴ Gersonides, however, is very careful to hide this conclusion from the readers of his Torah commentary.⁷⁵

Gersonides' approach to miracles, comparable to his approach to prophecy, is integrally related to his theory of divine providence. Prophecy and miracles result from the impersonal activity of the Active Intellect. Prophecy, which is one of the expressions of divine providence, reaches the one who has completed all the necessary preparations in order to attain this emanation from the Active Intellect, without the Active Intellect being cognizant of the recipient. Similarly, the miracle is performed on behalf of one who has reached the level of perfection that renders them worthy of this phenomenon, without the Active Intellect being cognizant of the one whose perfection sets off the providential order to the extent that miracles occur for the benefit of this individual. This order is different than the natural order and neutralizes it, though it too is impersonal. Therefore Gersonides, as distinct from his predecessors, does not attempt to explain miracles in terms of the workings of the natural order, such as by ascribing to the prophet a natural ability to bring about the miracle in one way or another. Rather, he thinks that the miracle results from a type of activity that has no naturalistic explanation yet at the same time it is not the effect of a personal act of volition, neither of the Active Intellect nor of God. His approach to divine providence in general and to miracles in particular

74 Ḥasdai Crescas pointed out the philosophical problems in Gersonides' approach in his effort to show these actions must be ascribed to the personal activity of God, who knows individuals *qua* individuals. According to Crescas, Gersonides has no coherent explanation for how the Active Intellect, which does not know individuals *qua* individuals, can perform specific miracles for a specific person or group. See *Or HaShem* 2.2.1-3; 3.1.5. For a discussion of this point, see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 439-443. Crescas devotes the sixth part of the third section of his treatise to a detailed discussion of the prophecy of Moses; see *ibid.*, 431-435, 471-477.

75 Several scholars have explored Gersonides' *Commentary on the Torah* and the relation between the views he presents there and those found in his philosophical treatise, *The Wars of the Lord*. See the bibliography compiled by Menachem Kellner, "Bibliographia Gersonideana," in *Studies on Gersonides—A Fourteenth-Century Jewish Philosopher-Scientist*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 367-414. See also my *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 399-418.

enables him to accept in a literal manner the occurrence of most of the miracles depicted in the Bible, and furthermore, to view them as “supernatural” phenomena.

In his *Commentary on the Torah*, Gersonides treats the prophecy of Moses as miraculous. For example, he writes in his commentary on Deuteronomy, chapter 4 (the eighth lesson):

This comes to inform us that Moses did not merit this highest level of prophecy due to the advantage of his natural preparedness to attain the emanation of prophecy . . . since others may also come to possess this [level of] preparedness. For this is possible in the species, as has been explained in the natural sciences. The holy Torah clarified that there never will be a prophet who transmits a Torah aside from Moses, of blessed memory. Therefore it is clear that God by way of a miracle was responsible for the magnitude of the level of prophecy of Moses, in order that the Torah be transmitted by him, just as the matter of the Gathering at Sinai was by way of a miracle. . . . For this reason, it is fitting that you know that when we said in the portion of Balaq that another prophet like Moses will arise in Israel and in the rest of the nations, and he is the king messiah for whom we hope, we did not mean to say that he will be a prophet transmitting a Torah, for this is impossible. It is not by way of prophecy *qua* prophecy to proclaim a divine Law, except in a miraculous way as in the case of the prophecy of Moses. Rather, what we meant to say is that he will be similar to him, or even superior, in the matters that are mentioned there—namely, the creation of signs and miracles and the rest of the matters that ensue, as it is stated: *There did not arise in Israel another prophet like Moses* [Deuteronomy 34:10].⁷⁶

Gersonides expands upon this point at the end of his *Commentary on the Torah* (Deuteronomy, chapter 34, the fifteenth lesson):

Perhaps one will raise an objection and say: Why is it not possible that a different prophet will transmit a Torah as did Moses? How could the Torah have decreed that this Torah will never change and that nothing will be added to it or deleted from it? For if this is the case, the capacity he possesses [the prophet who is as perfect as Moses] to be a prophet who transmits a Torah is in vain. The answer to this is that no one will be equal to Moses in this matter. For his

⁷⁶ *Perushei Rablag 'al HaTorah*, vol. 5, 27-28; cf. vol. 4, 136-137 (Numbers, chap. 25, the second lesson).

prophecy to transmit the Torah is miraculous, and does not belong to the capacity of a prophet *qua* prophet, if it was not by way of a miracle. God clarified that it is not His will to create a different Torah, or to add to it or delete from it a permanent addition or deletion. In this manner the objection is removed.⁷⁷

According to Gersonides, the prophet for whom miracles like those of Moses will be performed is the king messiah. It is with a description of the messiah and his miracles that Gersonides chooses to conclude his commentary,⁷⁸ a subject that is intended to instill hope in his reader. One should not conclude from what he writes concerning the Torah and miracles in his *Commentary on the Torah* that Gersonides rejected the approach he presented earlier in *The Wars of the Lord* regarding God's impersonal activity. These miracles took place due to not only the perfection of the prophet, whether Moses or the king messiah, but also the providence the nation as a whole deserved to receive, or the merits of their forefathers.⁷⁹ Gersonides was of the opinion that this explanation was adequate from a philosophical perspective to accept the occurrence of all the miracles mentioned in the Torah, the miracles that according to tradition were to take place at the time of the final redemption, as well as the Torah itself as a law that was bestowed upon Moses from on high. It follows from Gersonides' analysis that the providential order, though it is an impersonal one, for both God and the Active Intellect do not know individuals *qua* individuals, still operates in a personal manner. The most manifest expression of this can be discerned in all the phenomena that are connected with the prophecy of Moses.

The Voice of God⁸⁰

Perhaps no supernatural phenomenon mentioned in the Torah better illustrates God's ability to act directly in history than the heavenly

77 Ibid., vol. 5, 351.

78 Ibid., 352 (the nineteenth lesson). See Menachem Kellner, "Gersonides on Miracles, the Messiah, and Resurrection," *Daat* 4 (1980): 5-34.

79 See *The Wars of the Lord* 4.6 (vol. 2, 200); 6.2.14 (vol. 3, 504).

80 Much of this section is based on my article, "The Voice of God in Medieval Jewish Philosophic Exegesis," *Daat* 16 (1986): 29-38 (Heb.). It should be noted that my

voice heard by Israel at Sinai. Given the fact that all the medieval Jewish philosophers accepted the view that God was incorporeal and hence possessed no physical organs, God could not be conceived as actually speaking. R. Saadiah's solution to this difficulty was to treat the speech as audible sounds that were created by God in the air, a solution that has its roots in the Aramaic translation of Onqelos to the Torah.⁸¹ R. Saadiah does not confine this phenomenon to the revelation at Sinai and to the private revelations to Moses. He treats the speech heard by prophets in general as created speech, often accompanied by the appearance of the Created Glory.⁸² The notions of created speech and the Created Glory not only serve to solve the problem of anthropomorphism, but they also provide an empirical means for the prophet to verify that he is in fact receiving a communication from God—the five senses in R. Saadiah's view being a source of reliable knowledge.⁸³ The implication of this approach is that God is personally involved in every transmission of prophecy—God chooses each prophet individually, and creates the actual words heard by him.

In regard to normative prophecy, Maimonides rejects this approach, considering instead the sights and sounds experienced by the prophet as resulting from an emanation to the imaginative faculty.⁸⁴ Thus they have no reality outside the prophet's soul. As for the revelation at Sinai and the speech of God to Moses, however, he appears to accept the view of audible created speech, which in turn entails that the immediate agent of every word of the Torah is in fact God. This is precisely

interpretation of Maimonides was later advanced independently by Jacob Levinger in *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier*, 39-48.

- 81 For a study of R. Saadiah's theory of the created voice, see Alexander Altmann, "Saadya's Theory of Revelation: its Origin and Background," in *Saadya Studies*, ed. E. I. J. Rosenthal (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1943), 4-25; Harry Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalām in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 87-93. See also *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 56-85.
- 82 *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 2.12. R. Saadiah, however, also maintains that in many instances the angels transmitted the divine communication to the prophets; see *ibid.* 2.10.
- 83 *Ibid.* Introduction.5.
- 84 See *Guide* 2.36-38, 41-45. For an analysis of these chapters, see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 239-257, 263-284.

the view that Maimonides posits as the eighth principle of the faith in his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*, though there he leaves open the question of the manner by which the words reached Moses. It is also the view that he presents in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 8.1 in reference to the revelation at Sinai. The necessity of this view for upholding the Israelites' belief in the Torah as a divine law is clear. The question remains whether this is also Maimonides' personal view on the matter.

In several passages in the *Guide* Maimonides refers to the divine voice, treating it as audible, and at times referring to it as created. For the most part he utilizes this notion to negate corporeality from God. For example, in his discussion of the verb '*abor* (to pass) in *Guide* 1.21 he presents Onqelos' interpretation of Exodus 34:6, *And God passed by before his face and called*—that God caused His Indwelling to pass before Moses. Maimonides then adds:

You are free to believe whatever belief you wish. You may believe that the great station attained by [Moses] was indubitably, in its entirety, a vision of prophecy and that he solely desired intellectual apprehensions—everything, namely, that which he had demanded, that which was denied to him, and that which he apprehended, being intellectual and admitting of no recourse to the senses, as we interpreted in the first place. Or you may believe that there was, in addition to this intellectual apprehension, an apprehension due to the sense of sight, which, however, had for its object a created thing, through seeing which the perfection of intellectual perfection may be achieved. . . . Or again you may believe that there was in addition an apprehension due to the sense of hearing; that which *passed by before his face* being the voice, which is likewise indubitably a created thing. Choose whatever opinion you wish, inasmuch as our only purpose is that you should not believe that when Scripture says, in the verse we are discussing, He “passed by,” the phrase is analogous to: *Pass before the people* [Exodus 17:5]. For God, may He be honored and magnified, is not a body, and it is not permitted to ascribe motion to Him. (50-51)

Maimonides clearly prefers the first opinion, that the senses of sight and hearing were not involved at all in Moses' prophecy, but the other interpretations at least negate from God corporeality and thus provide

legitimate alternatives. One should note that in addition to Exodus 34:6, Maimonides also cites in this chapter Numbers 7:89: *And he heard the voice speaking to him*, referring to the voice Moses heard in the Tabernacle *between the two cherubs*. This suggests that both verses are to be interpreted in a similar manner. Moreover, in the same context he brings a further example of a divine voice calling to a prophet, Isaiah 40:6. Subsequently in his discussion of prophecy he clarifies that Isaiah's prophetic visions resulted from an emanation to the imagination,⁸⁵ hence no audible voice was heard by Isaiah at all. This supports the conclusion that Maimonides did not think that an audible created voice was involved even in the case of Moses. In other passages too, in which he cites verses depicting a voice addressing Moses, his concern is to negate the interpretation of God as corporeal.⁸⁶ The notion of an audible voice created by God thus is of great benefit to the belief of the masses in Maimonides' view, even if he himself does not accept it and hints that Moses' prophecy consisted solely of intellectual apprehensions.⁸⁷

85 *Guide* 2.44-45.

86 *Ibid.*, 1.37, 65.

87 In a letter to Ḥasdai Halevi, written in Hebrew, purportedly by a disciple of Maimonides in Maimonides' name, there is a discussion of the voice heard by Moses. Maimonides labels it a "created voice" that issued forth from the cloud. Yet he also brings the interpretation in the name of "many others" that the voice was not a sensible one, but "the soul of Moses our Master grasped the supernal theoretical intelligibles and understood and 'heard' in the true manner the meaning of the divine intelligibles." Maimonides indicates that if Scripture had not explicitly taught: *And he heard the voice speaking to him* (Numbers 7:89), he would have agreed with this interpretation. See Isaac Shailat (ed. and Heb. trans.), *Iggerot HaRambam* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1987), 680. The argument that the literal meaning of Scripture compelled Maimonides to reject the interpretation that the "voice" was not a sensible one is certainly problematic. Maimonides after all refrains from interpreting the voice heard by the other prophets as an audible created one. It would appear that the opinion Maimonides mentions and rejects is in fact his esoteric opinion, as can be seen by the questionable reason he gives for dismissing it. It should be noted that a number of scholars question the authenticity of this letter. Shailat too views it as a fake, though he does not rule out the possibility that parts of it are based on authentic responses by Maimonides; see *ibid.*, 675.

The voice heard by Israel at Sinai poses a greater difficulty, for in this case an entire nation was reported to have heard the voice, and on the basis of this event they accepted the Torah. It is significant that in the first part of the *Guide* Maimonides brings the verse regarding the Gathering at Sinai: *And all the people saw the sounds* (Exodus 20:15) to illustrate the notion that, “although this station constituted a vision of prophecy, as is well known and universally admitted in our community, action and speech are ascribed to God so that an overflow proceeding from Him should thereby be indicated” (*Guide* 1.46: 100). The labeling of the Gathering at Sinai as “a vision of prophecy” hints at the manner in which Maimonides understands this event, though it remains unclear how an entire nation can collectively experience a vision that does not involve one’s external senses. One, however, may counter this interpretation by arguing that Maimonides is using the notion of “vision” here in a loose manner, not in its precise sense, and he certainly does not wish to deny the literal truth of the Torah’s description of this event.

Maimonides’ comments concerning the Gathering at Sinai in the context of his discussion of prophecy throw some further light on this issue. In *Guide* 2.32, Maimonides distinguishes between the reception of prophecy at Sinai, which was solely in accordance with the preparedness of each individual, and the great fire and terrifying sounds that everyone there witnessed. Only the latter phenomena are labeled by Maimonides as miraculous, suggesting that they did in fact occur in reality. In the following chapter he distinguishes the sounds and lightning from the voice of God, “I mean the created voice from which the speech [of God] was understood” (*Guide* 2.33: 365). The use of the term “created voice” certainly implies an audible voice, but Maimonides had already shown his inclination to understand God’s “voice” as signifying an emanation from God. In an attempt to uphold the principle that all individuals receive from the emanation what they are prepared to receive, Maimonides brings two different interpretations of what the people heard from the divine voice at Sinai. According to the first interpretation, they heard a great sound but no articulated words at all, indicating that none of them received prophecy but they

all relied completely on the prophecy of Moses. According to the rabbinic view, however, the people heard the actual words of the first two Commandments. This interpretation is not favored by Maimonides, but he nonetheless points out that even according to this view the people heard what they were prepared to hear, for the first two Commandments could be known by demonstration, and “everything that can be known by demonstration, the status of the prophet and that of everyone else who knows it are equal” (364). In this manner he shows that according to the view of the Sages the Israelites were prepared to receive/apprehend the existence of the one God independent of Moses’ prophecy. Maimonides’ discussion at least suggests the possibility that while one should interpret the Israelites’ gathering around Mount Sinai literally, their hearing of divine speech is a parable signifying an experience of collective enlightenment, rather than the actual hearing of an audible heavenly voice. This unique gathering resulted in the acceptance of the Ten Commandments and the law transmitted by Moses on the basis of what the Israelites witnessed and apprehended there.

As for the miraculous phenomena that took place during this gathering, Maimonides, in the course of a later discussion regarding the difficulty of grasping that which is separate from matter, brings a report on the weather conditions at Sinai at the time the Ten Commandments were received: “It is, moreover, well known and generally accepted in the religious community that the day of the Gathering at Mount Sinai was a day of clouds, of mist, and of a light rain” (*Guide* 3.9: 437). Maimonides interprets this description as a parable signifying “that the apprehension of His true reality is impossible for us because of the dark matter that encompasses us and not Him.” In this context he treats the Gathering at Sinai as “greater than any vision of prophecy and beyond any analogy.” While Maimonides’ stance serves to highlight the uniqueness of the event, more importantly it comes to preempt the interpretation that denies the veracity of the event by treating it *solely* as a parable, similar to all other prophetic visions, insofar as “everything that is apprehended in a vision of prophecy is only a parable for some notion.” One may conclude that Maimonides intimates here that the miraculous fires and terrifying sounds witnessed at Sinai in truth

resulted from the highly unusual weather conditions at the time. The story of the Gathering at Sinai thus is literally true, as opposed to prophetic visions in general, but the miracles accompanying this gathering were in fact rare natural events. This leaves open the possibility that the supernatural heavenly voice, on the other hand, should be interpreted in Maimonides' view solely as a parable, similar to the notion of hearing a divine voice or divine speech in other prophetic visions, signifying what transpired in the souls of each Israelite in the course of this collective experience.

The problem of the voice heard by Moses and the one heard by all of Israel at Sinai occupied Maimonides' followers in Provence, whom we have explored in this chapter. Levi ben Avraham relies on Maimonides' analysis of the term "face" in *Guide* 1.37 to explain that God's speech to Moses "face to face" signifies that the revelation came to him without the intermediary of an angel, clarifying what Maimonides leaves veiled. He writes:

Moses would grasp the Intellects and hear the pure speech from the emanation of the last of the angels—namely, the Active Intellect—without the mediation of an angel, that is to say, without the use of the imagination, as it is stated: *And the figure of God he looks upon* [Numbers 12:8], and it is stated: *God spoke to Moses face to face* [Exodus 33:11], and it is stated: *mouth to mouth* [Numbers 12:8]. This indicates conjunction with the Active Intellect.⁸⁸

By regarding the speech Moses heard as pure speech that is the product of his conjunction with the Active Intellect, Levi rejects the notion that Moses heard an audible voice.

The more difficult problem of the voice heard by the nation is addressed by Levi in the course of his discussion of the Giving of the Torah. He commences by presenting the classic view of the voice—namely, that it was a created audible voice. Maimonides had brought this view in the name of Onqelos, but R. Saadiah is the one who presents it most explicitly as we have seen. Drawing upon

88 *Livyat Ĥen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 138.

Maimonides' discussion in *Guide* 2.33, but with R. Saadiah's approach in mind, Levi writes:

The voice that Moses heard was a created voice that God created from the air, hence Onqelos translated, *and God answered him with a voice* [Exodus 19:19]: "On the part of God he was answered by a voice." He translated, *but let not the Lord speak with us* [Exodus 20:16]: "[Speech] should not be spoken on the part of God." Israel also understood that the speech of God was by a created voice without a body, as it is stated: *And a figure you do not see, only a voice* [Deuteronomy 4:12].⁸⁹

Yet side by side with this interpretation Levi brings an exceptionally radical interpretation, though not in his own name:

There was one who interpreted that God aided and gave power to Moses to make his voice heard to the people, as in the literary usage [of the term "answer"]: *money answers every need* [Ecclesiastes 10:19]. This is the reason it is written: *He heard the voice speaking (middaber) with him* [Numbers 7:89], and it does not say: "speaking (*meddaber*) to him," from the intensive form of the word, but *middaber* from the reflexive. . . . It is possible that the [voice] came forth from the cloud. This is seen from the fact that via a cloud the revelation came to him, as Scripture clarifies by indicating: *And when Moses entered the Tent the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the Tent and spoke with Moses* [Exodus 33:9], and indicating: *Behold I come to you in a thick cloud* [ibid., 9].

According to this interpretation, an audible voice was in fact heard at Sinai by the people, but the voice belonged to Moses when he was on top of the mountain. This phenomenon is tied up with the thick cloud, which apparently, in the mind of the interpreter, served to amplify Moses' voice.

Levi brings yet another interpretation, reiterating the one he had already brought regarding the voice heard by Moses, but this time not as his own view:

There was one who understood God's speech with Moses as being without sounds at all, as is the case with the other prophets, but

89 Ibid., 199.

his intellect grasped the [Separate] Intellects, received emanation, and apprehended knowledge of the Supernal, in accordance with what is possible for one at the highest level of humanity. This [internal] intellectual speech and conception of the intelligibles is what Scripture terms “voice.” For this reason, *He heard the voice speaking (middaber) with him* [Numbers 7:89], is in the reflexive conjugation⁹⁰

Levi indicates that he favors the interpretation that Scripture refers to a created audible voice by means of which God spoke to Moses, but he goes on to indicate that the speech (*dibbur*) heard by Moses alone signifies conjunction.⁹¹ He thus leaves it an open question how he understood the voice heard by Moses, let alone the one heard by all of Israel.

It is precisely the radical interpretation of the voice of God presented by Levi in the name of others that Nissim of Marseille adopts and presents as his own, and moreover as the esoteric view of the greatest of the Sages:

“Why then does it say: *Moses spoke [and God answered him by a voice]* [Exodus 19:19]? It merely teaches that Moses was endowed with strength and force, and that God helped him with a voice, so that Moses could let Israel hear the same tone which he himself heard [*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, Tractate Bahodesh, 4].”⁹² This shows that Rabbi Akiva understood the term “answered him” (*ya’anenu*) as in: *The Lord shall answer (ya’aneh) the wellbeing of Pharaoh* [Genesis 41:16], which signifies—will agree to and assist in his wellbeing.⁹³ Thus by the power of God issued forth a created thing that speaks, which assisted Moses’ voice from on top of the mountain, so that it was heard by Israel on the bottom of the mountain as a mighty sound, as a voice created in the air of the heavenly

90 Ibid., 202.

91 Ibid., 202-203. It should be noted that a similar ambiguity characterizes Levi’s treatment of the tablets upon which were engraved the Ten Commandments. Though he appears to favor the supernatural interpretation that God engraved the first set of tablets, it is not entirely clear from his discussion whether this is his actual view. See *ibid.*, 252, 257-258. Compare to Maimonides’ treatment of this topic in *Guide* 1.66.

92 Jacob Z. Lauterbach (trans.), *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933), vol. 2, 223.

93 Compare to David Kimchi’s interpretation of the verse in his *Commentary on the Torah*.

firmament. And the “tone” Moses would hear, that is to say, by way of prophecy and the intellect that emanated upon him, he would let Israel hear with the aid of an object of God that would amplify his voice and strengthen it with a created voice that would reach the ears of the people.⁹⁴

While Nissim frames his comments in a somewhat ambiguous manner, there can be little doubt that he is alluding here to the view that the voice heard by the people was in fact Moses’ own voice. Moses received his prophecy on top of the mountain solely by his intellect in the form of internal speech, and he was able to convey the contents of his prophecy to the Israelites below by way of a “created voice”—namely, a natural object that he discovered on the top of the mountain that he was able to use in order to amplify his voice and make it sound like a created voice descending from heaven upon the people below.⁹⁵ Nissim in this manner attempts to buttress the interpretation he found in *Livyat Hen* by introducing an object that enabled Moses to make his voice heard to the nation. He undoubtedly felt that this subterfuge was necessary in order to instill in the hearts of the masses obedience to the laws Moses laid down as a result of the pure illumination of the intellect that he attained.

In his various treatises, Ibn Kaspi devotes very little attention to the problem of the voice heard by Moses or that by all of Israel. In a brief remark in *Tirat Kesef*, he indicates that the sounds and fire actually occurred during the Gathering at Sinai by the will of God, but does not enter into more detail.⁹⁶ His esoteric commentary on the *Guide*, *Maskiyot Kesef*, provides a few hints to his view on this issue. In his commentary on *Guide* 1.5, he reiterates the notion that the phenomena depicted as occurring at Sinai were in fact experienced by the senses, and hints that they were the product of Moses’ activity.⁹⁷ His juxtaposition of the Created Light or Glory, which he treats as natural

94 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 333.

95 Nissim may be thinking of some large horn-like object.

96 *Tirat Kesef*, 140-1.

97 *Maskiyot Kesef*, 20-21.

phenomena, such as the cloud descending upon the Tabernacle,⁹⁸ with the Created Voice suggests that he views the voice heard at Sinai by the nation as an audible one that was also brought about by Moses, though he does not state so explicitly. In his commentary on *Guide* 2.33, he elaborates upon Maimonides' interpretation of Onqelos, that what was heard by the nation was an entity that spoke, not God, but adds nothing to the nature of this existent and how it came about.⁹⁹

Gersonides also views the voice heard by the nation at Sinai as an audible one, which he treats as a miracle. In his commentary on Exodus 19:19 he writes:

The sound of the trumpet became increasingly stronger, and this phenomenon was a supreme miracle. Still another miracle was created there. Moses spoke with God, and when God answered him by way of prophecy, there was created an audible sound of speech, which Israel heard, and it became clear to them that God spoke with Moses. The creation of a sound of speech without the organ of speech is similar to the creation of a serpent from a rod. That is to say, the existence of a sound of speech is not impossible in itself, but it is impossible in nature for it to be created without an organ. Thus its creation was by way of a miracle.¹⁰⁰

Gersonides had already explained at the end of *The Wars of the Lord* that the immediate agent of miracles is the Active Intellect, which are performed by it as result of the level of perfection attained by the prophet.¹⁰¹

98 Not in all cases does Ibn Kaspi treat the Created Glory as a substance existing outside the soul of the prophet. Often it is beheld by the prophet in a vision, hence it is the product of his imagination. Ibn Kaspi prefers the former explanation when others also witness the Glory.

99 Ibid., 114. In *Tirat Kesef*, 140-141, Ibn Kaspi treats the voices and fires at Sinai as phenomena created by God and perceived by the senses, suggesting that this is also the case with the voice decreeing the Ten Commandments. His discussion in *Gevi'a Kesef*, 148, on the other hand, suggests that the speech of God at Sinai does not refer to an audible voice, but to the emanation from the Active Intellect. As for the private prophecy to Moses, Ibn Kaspi's comments in this case too suggest that no audible voice was heard, but he does not state so explicitly.

100 *Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, vol. 2, 142.

101 The voice Moses alone heard at Sinai in the cleft of the rock (Exodus 34:6), on the other hand, is treated as one heard in a vision—that is to say, it was not an audible

Conclusion

The question that challenged the Jewish philosophers that I dealt with in this chapter is whether miracles and the Torah can be explained in a manner that is in harmony with Aristotle's naturalistic approach to the world order. Some of the Provençal philosophers thought that the Aristotelian approach could be broadened to provide an explanation for the occurrence of miracles, a task that was already accomplished by the Islamic philosopher Avicenna. One should view the prophet himself as the immediate agent of the miracles by virtue of the level of speculative knowledge he attained and perhaps also by virtue of a special power of the soul to affect matter that is outside his own body. The legislation of the Torah one can ascribe to Moses by virtue of the complete knowledge of the world order that he attained, and his ability to employ this knowledge in order to legislate a perfect law that directs the nation toward human perfection. While Levi, Nissim, and Ibn Kaspi appear to favor this approach, Nissim less ambiguously than the other two thinkers, both Kalonymos and Gersonides reject it for different reasons. The philosophic reasons Kalonymos advances against this approach ultimately serve to bolster the traditional view that attributes miracles and the Torah to the personal volition of God. For Gersonides, the philosophical inadequacy of the approach that views Moses as the immediate agent of these phenomena calls for the development of a different philosophical approach. He posits a providential order beyond the natural order. In this order, the Active Intellect is the immediate agent of acts of providence, such as miracles. These acts are not regarded by Gersonides as natural ones. From this standpoint, Moses' perfection belongs to the natural order, while his prophecy belongs to the order of divine providence. Nevertheless, he sees the providential activity of the Active Intellect, as is true of all of its other activities, as impersonal, lacking all cognizance of the recipients of its activity. The perfection attained by an individual or a collective is responsible for activating its providential activity. We thus may label this order as a

verse. See *Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, vol. 2, 435.

mechanistic one, even if it is not considered natural according to the Aristotelian model. From a modern perspective, one can say that despite the significant difference between Gersonides' approach and that of other philosophers discussed in this chapter, a difference that allows Gersonides to consider the phenomena that are tied to Moses' prophecy to be "supernatural," the aim of his approach is the same—to distance from God all personal activities, that is to say, activities that God directs to an individual *qua* individual, and yet still propose an explanation that allows the acceptance of Moses' miracles, the creation of a heavenly voice and the Giving of the Torah.

Appendix: Some Comments on Maimonides' Approach to Miracles

In the *Guide*, Maimonides does not devote a detailed discussion to the topic of miracles but reveals his opinion in a number of comments, most of them found in the context of his discussion of creation and his discussion of the differences between the miracles of Moses and those of the other prophets.¹⁰² On one hand he maintains: "Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible" (*Guide* 2.25: 329). On the other hand he praises the Sages who were of the opinion:

Miracles too are something that is, in a certain respect, in nature. They say that when God created that which exists and stamped

¹⁰² Maimonides' most detailed discussion of miracles is at the end of his *Treatise on Resurrection* and at the end of his *Medical Aphorisms* in his short *Treatise Contra Galen*. Both these treatises were written after the *Guide* and both of them contain an apologetic component, with the view of defending God's ability to work miracles against the naturalistic approach of the philosophers. Maimonides' basic argument is that a deity who created the world certainly has the ability to change the nature of every creature in it. Only the conceptually impossible cannot be performed by God. Maimonides also has some important comments on this subject in his earlier legal works, most notably in his commentary on Mishnah Avot 5.6 and in *Eight Chapters*, 8. In the present context, I confine myself to his remarks in the *Guide*. For some other studies of Maimonides' view of miracles, see Hannah Kasher, "Biblical Miracles and the Universality of Natural Law: Maimonides' Three Methods of Harmonization," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 8 (1998): 25-52; and Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Maimonides and Miracles: The Growth of a (Dis)belief," *Jewish History* 18 (2004): 147-172.

upon it the existing nature, He put it into these natures that all the miracles that occurred would be produced in them at the time when they occurred. According to this opinion, the sign of a prophet consists in God's making known to him the time when he must make his proclamation, and thereupon a certain thing is effected according to what was put into its nature when first it received its particular impress. If this statement is as you will see it, it indicates the superiority of the man who made it and the fact that he found it extremely difficult to admit that a nature may change after the Work of the Beginning, or that another volition may supervene after that nature has been established in a definite way. For instance, he seems to consider that it was put into the nature of water to be continuous and always flow downwards except at the time of the drowning of the Egyptians; it was the particularity of that water to become divided. I have drawn your attention to the spirit of that passage and to the fact that all this serves to avoid having to admit the coming into being of something new. (*Guide* 2.29: 345)¹⁰³

In this manner, Maimonides indicates that even if one accepts the view that the world is created by showing that this view does not entail belief in a change in God's will or wisdom—such a change being impossible to ascribe to God according to the Aristotelian philosophers and Maimonides in their wake—there still remains a problem regarding miracles. At first glance, the miracle necessitates a change in the divine will, if not also a change in God's knowledge and wisdom. For this reason Maimonides praises the sage who tries to show that there is no change of will after creation, since the miracles were implanted in nature at the time of creation.

Despite his praise, Maimonides does not state explicitly that he agrees with this view. Moreover, he presents a different view in his own name immediately prior to passage cited above, in which he argues:

I have said that a thing does not change its nature in such a way that the change is permanent merely in order to be cautious with regard

103 Maimonides bases his comments on *Genesis Rabbah* 5.4. He opens his discussion with the remark: "The Sages, may their memory be blessed, have made a very strange (*gharīb*) statement about miracles." On the positive usage of the term *gharīb* in Maimonides' writings, see Avraham Nuriel, *Concealed and Revealed in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 158-164 (Heb.).

to the miracles. For although the rod was turned into a serpent, the water into blood, and the pure and noble hand became without a natural cause that necessitated this, these and similar things were not permanent and did not become another nature. But as they, may their memory be blessed, say: “The world goes its customary way” [BT ‘Avodah Zarah 54b]. This is my opinion, and this is what ought to be believed. (ibid.)

Maimonides does not enter into a detailed analysis of these two views, nor does he indicate what the difference is between the Sages’ view and his own, if in fact he regards them as two different views. It should be noted that the examples of miracles he brings in the presentation of his own view and in the presentation of that of the Sages are different. He may have been of the opinion that the Sages’ explanation is not appropriate for those miracles in which an entity is transformed into a different one, such as the rod that was transformed into a serpent, for it is difficult to consider them exceptional events that were implanted in nature. They do not lend themselves to any naturalistic explanation, and it appears that they can only occur as a result of an act of volition on the part of an agent who is capable of bringing about such a transformation.

In any case, despite his distinct tendency to defend the natural order as it is, and to regard it as the primary expression of God’s wisdom and ability, Maimonides accepts the belief that miracles reveal God’s ability to act outside the workings of nature and even counter to it, and that this belief is essential to Judaism. Belief in the creation of the world is the basis for belief in miracles and that the Torah is from heaven, as Maimonides argues in *Guide* 2.25:

The belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it—that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything—destroy the Law in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out. (328-329)

Yet if Maimonides’ true view is that the world is without beginning, as I argued in chapter 3, it is clear that he did not agree with the belief

that God is the immediate agent of the miracles and immediate author of the Torah, or that particular miracles were implanted in nature at the time of creation. The question immediately arises whether amidst Maimonides' various comments on miracles one can discern hints to an esoteric approach that explains their occurrence in a manner that is in harmony with Aristotelian thought. As we have already seen, Avicenna developed an approach that posited that the prophet himself was the agent of miracles. Al-Ghazali presents Avicenna's approach in his *Incoherence of the Philosophers*.¹⁰⁴ In the Jewish world prior to Maimonides, both Ibn Ezra and Abraham Ibn Daud followed in Avicenna's footsteps.¹⁰⁵ There is little doubt that Maimonides was acquainted with some if not all of these sources.

In an article on miracles I wrote that perhaps a veiled allusion to the idea that the prophet is the agent of miracles can be detected in *Guide* 1.61, where Maimonides polemicizes against the writers of amulets in the course of his discussion of the names of God:

Do not let occur to your mind the vain imaginings of the writers of charms or what names you may hear from them or may find in their stupid books, names that they have invented, which are not indicative of any notion whatsoever, but which they call "the names" and of which they think that they necessitate holiness and purity and work miracles. All these are stories that it is not seemly for a perfect man to listen to, much less to believe. None is called "the articulated name" except the name having four letters that is written but not read in accordance with the sounds written down. (149)¹⁰⁶

I wrote in reference to this passage:

It is noteworthy that Maimonides does not negate the view that one can perform miracles through knowledge of the "articulated Name."

104 Al-Ghazali, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), Discussion 17, 172-173.

105 See above, n. 12.

106 See Aviezer Ravitzky, "Maimonides and his Disciples on Linguistic Magic and 'the Vain Imaginings of the Writers of Charms'," in *Jewish Culture in the Eye of the Storm: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Yosef Aḥituv*, ed. Avi Sagi and Naḥem Ilan ('Ein Tsurim: HaKibbutz HaMe'uḥad, 2002), 431-458 (Heb.).

To Maimonides, knowledge of the Name is not similar to that of some magical formula. Rather, it indicates notions with respect to the divine essence. Moses, in Maimonides' view, possessed the highest level of knowledge of God, and of how the world is governed by Him possible for man. On the basis of this knowledge, he may have been able to produce exceptional events. This conclusion would explain Maimonides' position that just as Moses' apprehension and prophecy were superior to those of all others, so were his miracles.¹⁰⁷

I would like to take this opportunity to substantiate this hypothesis further.

Maimonides continues to explain the meaning of the articulated Name in the following chapter when discussing the priestly benediction:

I believe that the dictum: "The Sages transmit the the name having four letters once a week to their sons and their pupil [BT Qiddushin 71a]," refers not only to their teaching the mode of pronouncing this name but also to their making known the notion because of which this name has been originated without any derivation. Accordingly, there also would be in this notion a divine secret. (*Guide* 1.62: 150)

That is to say, knowledge of the Name is primarily metaphysical knowledge and not the manner in which the letters are articulated. The other special divine names too, according to Maimonides, indicate metaphysical notions regarding the Deity.¹⁰⁸

In chapter 63, Maimonides turns to the story of the burning bush and the significance of the divine names that Moses learned in his vision. In this context, Maimonides also notes that Moses was the first prophet who received a prophetic mission to others,¹⁰⁹ whereas the patriarchs received prophetic communications pertaining to their personal affairs alone. In the same vision, Moses also learned the philosophic proofs that he was to teach the Israelite sages in order to demonstrate that God is the necessary existent, and not the soul of the

107 "Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," 114

108 Several times in the chapter Maimonides repeats the view that what was taught regarding all the special names of God were the notions they indicate and not simply how they were to be pronounced. Compare to the approach of Nissim of Marseille, *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 404-407.

109 On the nature of prophetic missions in general in the philosophy of Maimonides, see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 252-253.

sphere—the belief that characterized the idolatrous religions of old. Maimonides continues:

[Moses], peace be on him, posed another question saying: once they have accepted by means of these intellectual demonstrations the view that there is an existent deity, what shall be my proof that the existent deity has sent me? Thereupon he was granted the miracle. (155)

Maimonides does not explain here the true nature of the vision that Moses beheld. When Maimonides deals with the subject of prophecy in the second part, he treats all prophetic visions as the product of the imaginative faculty, but he is careful to exclude Moses from the description of this phenomenon that he brings there. Maimonides, however, does not deny that other prophets also performed miracles—the opposite is the case¹¹⁰—only that one should regard Moses' miracles as superior to all others. The question arises how they succeeded in this matter. The answer appears to be straightforward: they learned which miracle was about to take place by means of their prophetic vision, which resulted from an emanation upon their intellect and their imaginative faculty. Yet as I attempted to show in my book on prophecy, one should not interpret Maimonides as maintaining that the emanation that reaches the prophet contains specific knowledge that is directed to him personally. Rather, the emanation strengthens the faculties of the soul of the prophet, enabling him to arrive at conclusions regarding conceptual matters or in the field of divination based on the knowledge that he previously acquired.¹¹¹ If this is the case, the prophet apparently learns of exceptional occurrences or anomalies in nature that are about to take place, or how to act upon different bodies to bring about changes in them, pertaining to those matters upon which he concentrated his thought when the prophetic emanation reached him.

Maimonides hints in *Guide* 3.45 that Moses too received his prophecy by means of the imaginative faculty in his vision of the burning bush: “Even in the case of Moses our Master his prophetic

110 See, for example, *Guide* 2.35.


111 See *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 243-245.

mission is inaugurated through an angel: *And there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord in the heart of fire (Exodus 3:2)*” (576). It appears that this side remark, which touches only indirectly upon the subject of the chapter, is a good example of Maimonides’ esoteric writing, in which “nothing has been mentioned out of its place, save with a view to explaining some matter in its proper place” (*Guide* 1.introduction: 15). There are different possibilities for interpreting the secret Maimonides wishes to hide, and it is not my intent to deal with them here.¹¹² One thing is certain. The miracles that Moses saw at the burning bush were in a vision that was created by his imaginative faculty as a result of the emanation that reached him from the Active Intellect. This signifies that the miracles beheld by Moses at the burning bush did not happen in reality. When they did happen later on, for the transformation of a rod into a serpent subsequently took place publicly in Pharaoh’s court, they apparently were performed on the basis of knowledge acquired by Moses during his initial vision. Moses then was the agent of these miracles as a result of the emanation that descended upon his intellect and imaginative faculty. It seems to me that the interpretation of the vision of the burning bush that Nissim explicitly presents in *Ma’aseh Nissim* is in fact the esoteric view of Maimonides. Nissim writes:

If you are not pleased with the view that what happened between God and Moses regarding the two miracles mentioned there occurred in his internal senses [i.e., the imagination], but you believe that they occurred in reality—there is no harm in this. Furthermore, if you find this view harmful [that the miracles did not occur in reality], I will retract it and say that God showed him and taught him privately how to bring them about, till he knew how to perform them before the community of Israel and before Pharaoh. Congruous with this view is His saying: *See all the miracles that I have put into your hand* [Exodus 4:21]—until he knows how to do them as he knows them in his mind, till he can do them accurately without mishap. For by demonstration and experience he will fulfill his objective.¹¹³

112 Ibid., 297-301.

113 *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 202. Compare Moses Narboni’s commentary on *Guide* 2.29 (Jacob Goldenthal [ed.], *Be’ur Narboni le-Sefer Moreh Nevukhim* [Vienna, 1852], 38b).



Reasons for the Commandments in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and in Provençal Jewish Philosophy

Introduction

In the introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides sets forth the purpose of his treatise and adds the following remark:

I do not think that anyone possessing an unimpaired capacity imagines that the words of the Torah referred to here that one contrives to understand through understanding the meaning of parables, are ordinances concerning the building of Tabernacle, the *lulab*, and the law of four trustees. Rather what this text has in view here is, without any doubt, the understanding of obscure matters. (11)¹

The “obscure matters” mentioned by Maimonides apparently refer to the “secrets of the Torah,” which he equates with the natural and metaphysical sciences.² He thereby clarifies from the outset of his

1 All English translations of the *Guide* are taken from the translation of Shlomo Pines (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963). All other translations in this chapter are my own.

2 Maimonides identifies these sciences with the “work of creation” and “work of the chariot”; see *Guide*, introduction; *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah, chapters 1-4. See above, chapter 7, 229.

treatise that he does not regard the commandments as allegories belonging to these secrets. They are to be understood in a literal manner. The most detailed listing of the secrets of the Torah is presented by Maimonides in *Guide* 1.35. They include a discussion of the divine attributes and the way they should be negated as pertaining to God, the meaning of the attributes that may be ascribed to God, a discussion of the creation of what God has created, the character of divine governance of the world, the manner of divine providence, the notions of divine will and divine knowledge, the notion of prophecy and its various degrees, and the meaning of the divine names. In the course of the *Guide*, Maimonides deals with all these topics. The esotericists among his interpreters have looked for his hidden views specifically in his discussions of these topics, attempting to show that his true position in these matters essentially conforms to that of the Aristotelian philosophers.³ On some of these issues, Maimonides expresses his agreement with the philosophers' world view explicitly. Divine governance of the world is one prominent example.⁴ More important for our purpose are those topics that are treated prominently in the *Guide* that are not on Maimonides' list, particularly the two topics that conclude the *Guide*—the reasons for the commandments and human perfection.⁵ Maimonides devotes well over half of the third part of the *Guide* to these two topics. Why so much attention

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- 3 The topics of creation, prophecy, and providence in particular have been the focus of attempts to show that Maimonides hints to his essential agreement with the Aristotelian view. For a summary of the divergent interpretations of Maimonides on these issues, see Howard Kreisel, "Moses Maimonides," in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1997), 256-272. For a survey of the esoteric interpretations of Maimonides' philosophy, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Secrets of the Guide of the Perplexed: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 159-207. See also above, chapter 3.
- 4 Maimonides writes in *Guide* 2.6: 265: "There is then nothing in what Aristotle for his part has said about this subject that is not in agreement with the Law."
- 5 These topics are not the only ones treated by Maimonides that are not on his list of the "secrets of the Torah." Maimonides also devotes a detailed discussion in the *Guide* to the proofs for the existence of God and the problem of evil. It may be argued, however, that these topics are subsumed into other ones that are mentioned, namely divine attributes and divine providence.

is paid to topics whose discussion is apparently not part of the explicit purpose of the treatise invites further investigation.

While Maimonides indicates that the commandments are not “obscure matters” that should be understood allegorically, thus suggesting the view that no esoteric doctrines are involved in his presentation of them,⁶ his approach to the commandments in *Guide* 3.25-49 has been the cause of more than a little perplexity. On some points Maimonides appears to present contradictory positions and even allusions to an esoteric doctrine, as shown by his medieval commentators as well as his modern ones. For example, Maimonides argues in *Guide* 3:26 that the particulars of the commandments may not always have a specific reason but may be arbitrary, one of his examples being the specific type of animal chosen for a particular sacrifice, while in 3.46 he offers explanations why particular animals were chosen for certain sacrifices.⁷ Another example is Maimonides’ apparently esoteric view on the nature of Oral Law, which emerges from a close reading of 3.41.⁸ To these two examples we may add positions presented in the *Guide* that appear to contradict his position in earlier works, such as his positive evaluation of asceticism in 3.48 and his treatment there of the Nazarite as a holy individual due to his abstinence, while regarding the Nazarite as a sinner in *Eight Chapters*, 4 for abstaining from permitted

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- 6 See, however, Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 397-400. Twersky argues that this topic belongs to the secrets of the Torah in Maimonides’ thought, but he provides only indirect evidence in support of this conclusion. It should be noted that this topic is essentially different than the ones mentioned explicitly by Maimonides. They deal with *being* and with the foundations of nature, thus corresponding to the subject matter of the theoretical sciences in Aristotelian philosophy. The reasons for the commandments belong more to the domain of political philosophy, which is a practical science.
- 7 See Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 30-31.
- 8 Maimonides’ discussion suggests that the Oral Law was not received by Moses together with the Written Law but developed later. For a discussion of this issue, see Jacob Levinger, “On the Oral Law in Maimonides’ Thought,” *Tarbiz* 37 (1968): 282-293 (Heb.) [reprinted in his *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989), 100-111].

pleasures.⁹ Further examples may also be adduced.¹⁰ These problematic issues notwithstanding, there appears to be nothing esoteric about the gist of Maimonides' approach. All commandments have a purpose or *telos*. They are designed to promote either true beliefs or the social welfare of the body politic, what Maimonides terms "the welfare of the soul" and "the welfare of the body."¹¹ In this manner they create an ideal environment for the pursuit of individual perfection, what Maimonides labels the "perfection of the soul," which is essentially the perfection of the intellect in its apprehension of all truths that the human intellect is capable of grasping regarding *being*.¹² Performance of the commandments accrues no benefit to God or to any of the existents above humanity in the hierarchy of being. Nor do the commandments have any magical-mystical effects on the soul that are closed to the discernment of human reason. The manner they mold a person's character traits can be grasped by a close examination of the activities they command or prohibit in conjunction with knowledge of Aristotelian ethics. In this chapter I would like to make a number of observations regarding Maimonides' approach to the reasons for the commandments, then turn to the treatment of this topic among some of his followers in Provence, particularly Levi ben Avraham, and conclude by returning to the place of this topic in the *Guide*.

Characteristics of Maimonides' Approach to the Reasons for the Commandments

The fundamental premise upon which Maimonides bases his discussion of the reasons for the commandments is that they all were legislated for a good reason, for God does nothing in vain.¹³ Their

9 I have dealt with this issue in "Asceticism in the Thought of R. Bahya Ibn Paquda and Maimonides," *Daat* 21 (1988): 5-22.

10 Maimonides apparently contradictory positions regarding commandments that appear to involve cruelty to animals, such as sending away the mother bird before taking her young, has also been discussed by scholars; see for example Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law*, 49-55, 63-66.

11 See *Guide* 3.27.

12 For a discussion of this issue, see Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 166-170, 189-193.

13 *Guide* 3.25.

ultimate purpose is to promote human perfection, which consists of the perfection of the intellect, which in turn requires living in a well ordered society. The latter goal is achieved by legislating laws that prevent the inhabitants of society from wronging each other and more importantly, that inculcate moral virtues which contribute to social harmony or the wellbeing of the body politic (as well as to the wellbeing of the body and soul of the individual). The former goal is advanced by inculcating true beliefs as well as actions that reinforce them or are designed to counter false beliefs.¹⁴ One of the most well known characteristics of Maimonides' approach is the historical-anthropological reasons he presents for many of the commandments. According to his reading of history, the idolatrous religions of old posed the greatest obstacle to the welfare of the soul and its perfection, as well as to the welfare of the body, that is to say, social morality. It is for this reason that the Torah's first goal is to eradicate idolatry, both its beliefs and the ritual practices that reinforce these beliefs.¹⁵ Many of the commandments are the immediate product of the Torah's campaign to put an end to these beliefs and practices. Ironically, the very success of the Torah in this area is why we no longer understand the reasons for many of the commandments. The books purportedly describing the ancient religion of the Sabians, foremost among them the *Nabatean Agriculture*, provide Maimonides with his critical insights into some of the Torah's more esoteric commandments, particularly those belonging to the realm of agriculture and to the order of sacrifice.¹⁶

14 Ibid. 3.27.

15 Ibid. 3.29-30.

16 Worthy of note is Maimonides' concluding remarks to his discussion of the reasons for the commandments in *ibid.* 3.49: 612:

In the case of most of the statutes whose reason is hidden from us, everything serves to keep people away from idolatry. The fact that there are particulars the reason for which is hidden from me and the utility of which I do not understand, is due to the circumstance that things known by hearsay are not like things that one has seen. Hence the extent of my knowledge of the ways of the Sabians drawn from books is not comparable to the knowledge of one who saw their practices with his eyes. . . . If we knew the particulars of those practices and heard details concerning those opinions, we would become clear regarding the wisdom manifested in the

A corollary of Maimonides' historical-anthropological approach is his view that many of the commandments reflect a form of historical compromise. The order of sacrifice in its entirety is the result of such a compromise, since it allows the Israelites to continue to practice the form of worship to which they were accustomed. At the same time it weans them away from idolatrous beliefs and practices by changing the details of the practice and directing all sacrifices to the true deity instead of false gods. In *Guide* 3.32, Maimonides categorizes the commandments involving the sacrifices as belonging to the "second intention" of the Torah, namely commandments not laid down for their own sake since they do not contribute directly to a person's perfection. Sacrifices do not constitute the ideal form of worship that lead most directly to a true apprehension of God, at least on the level appropriate for society as a whole. In promulgating the Law, God takes under consideration the fact that it is harder to uproot ritual practices than the beliefs they are designed to support. The basic practices must be maintained while attaching them to new beliefs. Otherwise the people will continue to hold on to the old practices, the promulgation of newer forms of worship by the Law notwithstanding, together with the idolatrous beliefs associated with them. While sacrifices are countenanced for this reason, God at the same time limits their practice in time and place and attempts to accustom the Israelites to the more superior form of worship, prayer, upon which the Law does not place the same limitations.¹⁷ As is the case with all legislations, the Law addresses a certain social reality and is framed from the standpoint of what is possible to achieve in a given situation.

details of the practices prescribed in the commandments concerning the sacrifices and the forms of uncleanness and other matters whose reason cannot, to my mind, be easily grasped.

- 17 Ibid. 3.32. It is important to note that Maimonides regards prayer as a Torah commandment and not a rabbinic ordinance. This view not only is in harmony with his philosophical approach but also reflects the dominant view of the Geonim. For a study of this issue, see in particular Gerald Blidstein, *Prayer in Maimonidean Halakha* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 23-68 (Heb.). On prayer in Maimonides' thought and how it contrasts to sacrifices see below, chapter 11, 403-406.

The notion of viewing many commandments as a result of historical compromise is certainly problematic from a religious standpoint. Gershom Scholem goes directly to the heart of the issue in the introductory essay to *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*:

For a purely historical understanding of religion, Maimonides' analysis of the origin of the mitzvot, the religious commandments, is of great importance, but he would be a bold man who would maintain that his theory of the mitzvot was likely to increase the enthusiasm of the faithful for their actual practice, likely to augment their immediate appeal to religious feeling. If the prohibition against seething a kid in its mother's milk and many similar irrational commandments are explicable as polemics against long-forgotten pagan rites, if the offering of sacrifice is a concession to the primitive mind, if other mitzvot carry with them antiquated moral and philosophical ideas—how can one expect the community to remain faithful to practices of which the antecedents have long since disappeared or of which the aims can be attained directly through philosophical reasoning? To the philosopher, the Halakah either had no significance at all, or one that was calculated to diminish rather than to enhance its prestige in his eyes.¹⁸

It would also be a bold individual who would argue that there is no truth in Scholem's critique of Maimonides' approach. Scholem employs his critique to explain the more attractive solution offered by the kabbalists in winning hearts and minds in the battle to uphold Jewish law and lore. It is not incidental that Scholem bases this critique on Maimonides' approach in the *Guide*. As already been noted by scholars such as Isadore Twersky, Maimonides' approach to the reasons for the commandments in the *Guide* differs from the approach that may be gleaned from the *Mishneh Torah*.¹⁹ In the *Guide*, the question that Maimonides seeks to answer is: why did God command these particular commandments, what is the divine motive? In the *Mishneh Torah*, on the other hand, Maimonides is more concerned with providing reasons that would add to one's devotion.

18 See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Publishing House, 1941), 29.

19 Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, 430-439.

The question he answers in those passages in the *Mishneh Torah* in which he provides reasons for the commandments is how one observing the commandments should view them. A religious existential perspective is adopted in this work.²⁰ These two perspectives—that which views the commandments from the standpoint of the reason God commands them and that which focuses on how one should regard the commandments while observing them—often overlap and there is no inherent contradiction between them. Maimonides himself adopts an existential approach to the commandments in *Guide* 3.51 while dealing with the form of worship appropriate to those striving for intellectual perfection. Nevertheless, these two approaches create different impressions on the mind of the reader, as is Maimonides' intent.

Even in confining oneself to Maimonides' approach in the *Guide* to commandments belonging to the "second intention," one discerns that his approach is not as one-dimensional as the critique of it suggests. The novelty and radical nature of his historical-anthropological approach to sacrifices has overshadowed the other dimensions of Maimonides' approach to this topic. As we have seen above, according to Maimonides' discussion of the "second intention" of the Law, the reason for the limitations in time and place governing the offering of sacrifices is due to the inferior nature of this type of worship. Yet in Maimonides' subsequent discussion one finds a positive value placed upon some of these limitations. Consider what Maimonides writes, for example, in 3.47, while discussing the stringent limitations placed upon the entry to the Sanctuary:

We have already explained that the whole intention with regard to the Sanctuary was to affect those that came to it with a feeling of awe and of fear, as it says: *Ye shall fear My Sanctuary* [Leviticus 19:30]. Now if one is continually in contact with a venerable object, the impression received from it in the soul diminishes and the feeling it provokes becomes slight. (593)

20 See in particular the example of Maimonides' different treatments of the laws of impurity brought by Twersky, *ibid.*, 435.

If familiarity breeds contempt, as Maimonides appears to argue, severely limiting certain practices insures that they remain awe-inspiring. Here too there is no inherent contradiction between Maimonides' different positions on this issue. The limitations on sacrifice may serve a twofold purpose: they are designed to create the feeling of awe while at the same time encourage the individual to become accustomed to the more frequent and superior form of worship, namely prayer. Yet Maimonides' discussion of the Sanctuary in *Guide* 3.47 reveals a far more nuanced approach to sacrifices as a mode of worship than the general view he expresses in 3.32. This is further underlined by the allegorical explanation he offers for aspects of the service in the Sanctuary as well as for some of the sacrifices in his discussion in *Guide* 3.46, as we shall see below.

Reasons for the Commandments in Provençal Jewish Philosophy

Given the dominant influence Maimonides' approach in the *Guide* exercised on most of the subsequent medieval Jewish philosophers, it is not without justification that Scholem views it as *the* medieval Jewish philosophical approach. This enables Scholem to treat Maimonides' view of the reasons for the commandments, particularly what must be regarded from many perspectives as its most problematic aspect, as reflecting the view of the medieval Jewish philosophers in general. Yet historical reality never fits neatly into the categories we create to describe it. It is not only Scholem who finds Maimonides' approach wanting on this issue; the same is true of many of Maimonides' most avid followers, particularly those who lived in Provence for the century and a half following his death. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, the translator of the *Guide*, started exploring the problem of the reasons for the commandments by focusing on some whose reason Maimonides did not adequately address in his view.²¹

21 Samuel Ibn Tibbon wrote a short treatise on the reason for the table with the loaves of bread that are placed in the Sanctuary, as well as for the candlestick. The motivation for writing this treatise is Maimonides' admission that he does not know the reason for this commandment; see *Guide* 3.45. Ibn Tibbon explains how both commandments are designed to combat the notion that God is corporeal. See MS Oxford 1252, 335a-337b.

His son-in-law, Jacob Anatoli, delves into the topic of the reasons for the commandments in more detail in his book of sermons, *Malmad ha-Talmidim*.²² Some of the later thirteenth-century and early fourteenth-century thinkers, such as Levi ben Avraham,²³ David ben Samuel HaKokhavi,²⁴

22 Ed. L. Silberman (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1866).

23 For a discussion of Levi and his encyclopedia *Livyat Hen*, see above, chapter 5.

24 See *Sefer ha-Batim*, vol. 2 (*Sefer Mizvah*), Moshe Hershler (ed.) (Jerusalem: Makhon Shalem, 1983).

Sefer ha-Batim, or *Kiryat Sefer* as the treatise was called by the author, is for the most part a legal work, in fact one of the most ambitious legal works ever written. Like Maimonides' code, and in fact building upon it, HaKokhavi deals with all topics of Jewish law, whether relevant to his own period or not, but unlike the *Mishneh Torah*, HaKokhavi cites his medieval sources, brings divergent opinions, and introduces a different method of organization. Most of this early fourteenth-century treatise is lost, while the few surviving parts have been published. Prior to writing his legal compendium, HaKokhavi wrote a different treatise entitled *Migdal David* (The Tower of David), which he then appended to the beginning of his legal compendium. This treatise consists of two parts, the first devoted to a detailed discussion of the principles of Judaism—HaKokhavi brings seven such principles: creation, free will, providence, Torah from heaven, reward and punishment, the coming of the messiah, and resurrection of the dead. The second part is an in-depth discussion of the rationale underlying each of the 613 commandments. The core of the treatise, the legal section, is divided into three parts, with each part subdivided into “houses” (*batim*), consisting of different categories of commandments (in total, 12 categories). In the introduction to *Kiryat Sefer*, HaKokhavi describes the mutual relation between the two sections of his combined treatise. The tower—knowledge of the principles of Judaism—defends the city, that is, the religion, against all its enemies who wish to destroy it, while the residents of the city supply the defenders of the tower with their nourishment, that is, knowledge of all the commandments. For an outline of the sections of the treatise, see Adolf Neubauer, “Documents inédits,” *Revue des études juives* 9 (1884): 218. For a discussion of HaKokhavi's thought, see Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 181-216 (Heb.); see also Howard Kreisel, “Between Faith and Reason: Three Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias,” in *Jewish Thought and Jewish Belief*, ed. Daniel J. Lasker (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2012), 82-85 (Heb.). For a discussion of his legal approach, see Pinchas Roth, “Later Provençal Sages—Jewish Law (Halakhah) and Rabbis in Southern France, 1215-1348” (PhD thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2012), 142-149 (Heb.). See, most recently, Gavriel Hanuka, “The Philosophy and Halakhic Theory of R. David d'Estelle” (PhD thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2014) (Heb.).

Nissim of Marseille,²⁵ and Gersonides,²⁶ among others,²⁷ explore this topic in depth.

Maimonides' approach disturbed these thinkers not only for existential-spiritual reasons, but also for theological ones. Why would God promulgate eternal commandments whose rationale was not eternal? True, they remain much more modest in their approach than the kabbalists who begin to flourish in the same period. They do not create narratives that place the commandments in the context of a cosmic struggle in which God's power could be augmented by their practice.²⁸ For them, as for Maimonides, God is the Unmoved Mover. God does not become emotional, let alone stronger or weaker, by what a person puts in his mouth, for example, or by what comes out of it. Humanity, both as individuals and as a collective, is the realm to which an under-

25 For a discussion of Nissim and his treatise *Ma'aseh Nissim*, see above, chapter 6.

26 This topic is almost, though not quite, completely absent from Gersonides' philosophic magnum opus, *The Wars of the Lord*, but as is only fitting occupies much of his attention throughout his Torah commentary. For a discussion of Gersonides' approach to the commandments, see Isaac Heinemann, *The Reasons for the Commandments in Jewish Literature* (Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency Press, 1966), 97-102 (Heb.); Charles Touati, *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonide* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1973), 492-505.

27 Mention should also be made of the Torah commentary of the late-thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist, Bahya ben Asher. Bahya's commentary is replete with philosophical explanations of many of the commandments, many of whose sources have not been identified. It is clear that Bahya had at his disposal philosophical sources that are no longer available to us. Some may have been the product of the Jewish philosophers of Provence. There is evidence, for example, that some of the writings of Moses Ibn Tibbon, the son of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, have not survived and that they dealt in part with the subject of the commandments. This evidence is based on references by Moses Ibn Tibbon in his *Sefer ha-Pe'ah* to these works, as well as references by Levi in his *Livyat Hen*. A number of the references allude to matters pertaining to the commandments; see my introduction to *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, and Avraham Israel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 9-35 (Heb.); see also above, chapter 4, 93, 111.

28 For a study of kabbalistic approaches to the commandments see Daniel Matt, "The Mystic and the Mizwot," in *Jewish Spirituality*, I, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad Press, 1986), 367-404. Frank Talmage contrasts philosophic and kabbalistic approaches along different lines, focusing on the allegorical interpretation of the commandments employed by the philosophers as against the symbolic interpretation of the kabbalists; see Frank Talmage, *Apples of Gold in Settings of Silver*, ed. Barry Walfish (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1999), 132-139.

standing of the reasons for the commandments is to be limited. They also share with Maimonides his fundamental belief that all commandments are essentially rational, that is understandable, from a human perspective, with the Aristotelian world view in its medieval form lying at the heart of their approaches. While Maimonides' historical-anthropological approach is not ignored by them or even dismissed, one can detect a recurring attempt to supplement this approach with reasons that are divorced from the vicissitudes of history and would not lose their luster over time.

Naturalistic reasons figure prominently in the Provençal Jewish philosophers' approaches to the commandments just as they do in Maimonides' approach. Maimonides explains certain prohibitions, such as forbidden foods, as being laid down in order to prevent harm to one's body. Blood for example is forbidden because of the damage it causes to the digestive system. He also regards pork as harmful despite the fact that he knows that not all medical authorities share this opinion.²⁹ While Maimonides does not view circumcision as being commanded for physical health reasons,³⁰ but to serve as a physical sign uniting all those committed to the monotheistic idea, he also regards it as decreasing sexual desires. This plays a crucial role in the pursuit of moral and intellectual perfection.³¹

Yet Maimonides at times breaks with a naturalistic framework for understanding the commandments. He suggests miraculous explanations for some of them. In *Guide* 3.47, for example, he writes:

As for the uncleanness of leprosy, we have already explained its meaning. The Sages, may their memory be blessed, have also

29 See *Guide* 3.48. For a discussion of this issue, see Levinger, *Maimonides as Philosopher and Codifier*, 112-124.

30 Such a reason would suggest that there is a lack of physical perfection in God's creation, since man is born with a superfluous part. Thus God's creation could not be regarded as the most perfect one possible. The same theological problem does not hold true with regard to moral defects, for the nature of the human being requires the striving for moral and intellectual perfection and not its possession from the outset.

31 *Guide* 3.49. For a discussion of Maimonides' approach to the commandment of circumcision, see Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law*, 87-107.

explained it. They have made known to us that the established principle in regard to it is that it is a punishment for slander and that at first this change appears in the walls. If the man repents, the purpose has been achieved. . . . If he still persists in his disobedience, it passes over to his clothing, then to his body. This is a miracle that was perpetuated in the religious community like that of the waters of the woman suspected of adultery. (597)

How committed is Maimonides to an understanding of the leprosy mentioned in the Torah as a miraculous phenomenon, or to the miraculous effectiveness of the water administered to a woman suspected of adultery in establishing her guilt, is an open question.³² In the continuation of his remarks in 3.48, he notes that leprosy is a contagious disease, a fact that suggests the tie drawn between leprosy and slander as not literal but metaphoric. In 3.49, he presents sociological and psychological reasons in reference to most of the other details of the ceremony of the woman accused of adultery. It is noteworthy that he posits an ongoing miracle in reference to the salient feature of this commandment. In this manner, Maimonides' approach to the commandments mirrors his approach to the divine governance of the world in general.³³ While the object of Maimonides' discussion is to instill in his readers a greater appreciation of God's governance of the world through the order of nature, and to limit the importance and extent of the miraculous, he nevertheless understands the theological importance of allowing for the occurrence of miracles. Similarly, his discussion of the commandments is designed to show how they further the natural ends of humanity in a manner that conforms to the order of nature, but at the same time reflect some of the supernaturalistic aspects of divine activity.

32 This problem belongs to the more general one of Maimonides' approach to miracles, specifically whether he accepts the view of God's direct intervention in events of the world or is secretly committed to a completely naturalistic understanding of all phenomena. For a discussion of this issue, see my "Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *JQR* 75 (1984): 101-114; see also above, chapter 9, 354-360.

33 On the similarity that Maimonides draws between Law and nature, see *Guide* 3.34, 49.

The Provençal Jewish philosophers tend to expand upon the naturalistic approach in understanding the reasons for the commandments, such as in the case of forbidden foods. They see all these foods as harmful to one's health and bring scientific explanations in support of this position.³⁴ They also extend the naturalistic approach to commandments that Maimonides sees primarily in terms of a reaction to Sabian practices. While Maimonides, for example, sees the commandment prohibiting the mingling of crops (*kil'ayim*) as combating idolatrous rites, the Jewish philosophers of Provence supplement this reason with theological and naturalistic ones. HaKokhavi, after agreeing with Maimonides' view, adds:

The words of our Sages suggest a different reason for the prohibition to mingle crops. They said: "*You shall observe my decrees* [Leviticus 19:19]—the decrees that I decreed in my world—you shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind" [BT Sanhedrin 60a]. It appears to me that the intent of this statement is to prohibit us, in accordance with the decree of divine wisdom in His world, from creating a species that is not found in nature, for this would lead to the denial that all existence is under God's providence. This denial would also lead to the corruption of the existents. One who tries by means of stratagems to create something that is not found in accordance with the nature of existence in its entirety will think that the world did not come into existence in accordance to the purpose of one who acts with intent. I say "the corruption of the existents," for the conjoining of one species with another in vegetation or in animals will lead to the corruption of that species. It will no longer continue to exist and no longer breed its kind.³⁵

34 See, for example, *Malmad ha-Talmidim*, 98a-b; *Sefer ha-Batim*, 379-388; *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 370-372, 378-379; Gersonides' commentary to Leviticus 11:1-46 (*Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, volume 3, ed. Jacob Lev Levy [Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1997], 127-155).

35 *Sefer ha-Batim*, 402. See also his explanation for the prohibition against wearing *kil'ayim* (*ibid.*, 320-321). Among subsequent Jewish philosophers a similar explanation appears in Nissim's *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 384, and Gersonides' commentary to Leviticus 19:19 (*Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, volume 3, 302-303). HaKokhavi's explanation appears earlier in Nahmanides' commentary to Leviticus 19:19, which may have served as HaKokhavi's source. Nahmanides too employs naturalistic reasons where he feels that they are in harmony with the notion of the eternal validity of the Torah and serve to strengthen one's commitment to observance. For a comparison between Maimonides and Nahmanides on their approaches to the

The eating of fruits of the tree in its first three years (*'orlah*) is yet another example where Maimonides looks to Sabian practices to provide an explanation for the prohibition,³⁶ while subsequent Jewish philosophers look also to nature. Nissim argues that the fruit in its first three years is bad for one's health. He also presents a good agricultural reason for this prohibition, based on the fact that most people think more in terms of short term gains than the long term consequences. As a result of the commandment, the individual rather than immediately attempting to multiply the fruits of the tree, as would be one's tendency and would lead to the tree's destruction, concentrates instead on strengthening the tree.³⁷

Health reasons, in addition to the other reasons presented by Maimonides, are also found among the explanations given by these philosophers for the commandment of circumcision.³⁸ HaKokhavi writes: "Circumcision is also a safeguard against some diseases. It is known by the science of medicine that many diseases occur in those possessing foreskins that do not occur in those who are circumcised."³⁹ A similar explanation is presented by Nissim.⁴⁰

Two other types of explanation, one Maimonides only occasionally employs and the other he does not present at all, tend to play a prominent role in Provençal approaches to this subject. Both these types of explanation can be traced to a different Spanish Jewish thinker who had a strong impact on Provençal Jewish philosophy, Abraham Ibn Ezra. The first type of explanation is the allegoric one. Certain commandments

commandments labeled divine decrees (*huqqim*), see Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law*, 109-160.

36 See *Guide* 3.37.

37 See *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 385-386. Nissim cites Ibn Ezra's commentary to Leviticus 19:23 as the source of the first reason. Gersonides expands upon this reason in his commentary to Leviticus 19:23 (*Perushei Rabbag 'al HaTorah*, volume 3, 304).

38 See Avraham Gross, "Reasons for Circumcision: Trends and Historical Influences," *Daat* 21 (1988): 25-46 (Heb.). The philosophers presenting this explanation ignore the reason for Maimonides' refusal to introduce the physical health factor in regard to circumcision. As noted above, this reason suggests a lack of physical perfection in God's creation of man, since he is born with a superfluous part that is a physical liability in addition to being a moral one.

39 *Sefer ha-Batim*, 72.

40 *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 373.

were promulgated with the intention of spurring our thought to focus on eternal scientific-theological truths or moral ones. In a famous passage toward the beginning of his commentary on Leviticus, a passage that appears also in his *Yesod Mora*, Ibn Ezra explains the sacrifice of *'olah* (that which goes up), a sacrifice that is burnt completely, as one that is offered to atone for *ba-'olah 'al ha-ruah*, that is to say, sinful thoughts.⁴¹ Both the name of the sacrifice and the details concerning it serve to stimulate the person to ponder the individual's more noble part and attempt to burn out completely any evil inclinations. Ibn Ezra's older contemporary, R. Judah Halevi, is another Spanish Jewish philosopher whose philosophical treatise was known to the Jewish philosophers of Provence and who made use of allegoric explanations in his approach to the commandments. In *Kuzari* 2.26, he presents an allegoric understanding of the Sanctuary, treating it as a macro-anthropos.⁴²

Maimonides tends to treat allegoric explanations as nice homilies rather than part of the original intent of the commandments.⁴³ This serves to safeguard the commandments themselves from being treated as allegories rather than actions that one is obligated to perform. Yet it is not the case that Maimonides denies all allegoric explanations of the commandments. His explanation of the sin-offering in *Guide* 3.46, for example, is primarily of an allegorical nature:

As for the burning of the sin-offerings, its purpose was to signify that the trace of the sin in question was wiped out and had disappeared, and that no trace remained of that action just as no trace remained of the sin-offering which was destroyed by having been burnt.

41 See Ibn Ezra's commentary to Leviticus 1:4, and his *Yesod Mora ve-Sod Torah*, ed. Joseph Cohen (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), 140.

42 The idea of the Sanctuary as a macro-anthropos is found in *Midrash Tanhuma*, Pequdei 3. While Halevi presents an allegorical interpretation, it appears that he thinks that the arrangement of the Sanctuary as a macro-anthropos has a theurgic function—it serves to bring down the spiritual forces from the divine world. The allegorical explanations of some of the commandments on the part of the Provençal philosophers, on the other hand, are based on the notion that the commandments are designed to serve as a prod to contemplate scientific and philosophic truths.

43 This is true for example of the rabbinic explanation for the four species on the Festival of Tabernacles; see *Guide* 3.43.

Consequently, its burning would not offer a sweet odor unto the Lord. (591)

Even more allegorical in nature is Maimonides' explanation of the scapegoat in the passage that immediately follows. Maimonides concludes his explanation with the following remark:

No one has any doubt that sins are not bodies that may be transported from the back of one individual to that of another. But all these actions are parables serving to bring forth a form in the soul so that a passion toward repentance should result: We have freed ourselves from all our previous actions, cast them behind our backs, and removed them to an extreme difference. (Ibid.)

The primary reason that Maimonides resorts to allegorical explanation in these instances in all probability is to avoid the most evident and far more problematic alternative: namely, magical explanations.⁴⁴ These have no place at all in Maimonides' thought.

Maimonides' ambivalence regarding allegorical explanations can be detected in the qualified manner he presents the final explanation of this kind in the chapter:

As for the offering of wine, I am up to now perplexed with regard to it: How could He have commanded to offer it, since the idolaters offered it? No reason for this has occurred to me. Someone else gave the following reason: For the desire, which is located in the liver, the most excellent thing is meat; for the animal faculty, which is located in the heart, the most excellent thing is wine; similarly the faculty located in the brain—that is, the psychic faculty—takes pleasure in songs accompanied by instruments. Therefore every faculty offers to

44 Even more problematic is the explanation that regards the scapegoat as a sacrifice to the fallen angel Azazel or Azael. This explanation would certainly transform the commandment into an idolatrous act in Maimonides' view, though he makes no allusion to it. The notion that the scapegoat is dedicated to a fallen angel is preserved in *Pirḳei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 46, and in *Yalqut Shimoni* to Genesis 6, no. 44, a midrash that is known to the Jewish philosophers of Provence; see for example my edition of *Livyat Ḥen: The Work of Creation* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2004), 341 (Heb.). The *Zohar* too builds upon this midrash in explaining the scapegoat ritual; see *Zohar*, II, 184b. See also BT Yoma 67b, which transforms the scapegoat into a form of atonement for the sins of the fallen angels.

God the thing most cherished by it. Accordingly offerings consist in meat, wine and sound—I mean song. (591-592)

This explanation is offered not in Maimonides' own name and only because his own most likely explanation for practices concerning sacrifices fails him in this instance. Why Maimonides offers an explanation at all in this case is not too difficult to discern. The practices involved evoke the conception that God enjoys corporeal pleasures. An appropriate counter-explanation had to be adduced to put the focus of the commandment back on humanity.⁴⁵

The allegorical approach to the structure of the Sanctuary and its service exerted an important influence on the thought of the Jewish philosophers of Provence. Gersonides, for example, devotes a lengthy excursus on this subject in his commentary to Exodus 25-27, Lesson 3.⁴⁶ Building upon Halevi's approach, Gersonides treats the Sanctuary both as a macro-anthropos as well as a micro-cosmos. The latter allegorical understanding of the Sanctuary figures prominently also in the commentary of Nissim.⁴⁷ HaKokhavi expands upon Halevi's allegorical explanation of the order of sacrifices and points out the limitations of Maimonides' approach in his own discourse on the subject.⁴⁸ The physical and metaphysical ideas conveyed by the structure of the Sanctuary and its utensils as depicted by these thinkers are based on Aristotelian science. While they would seem antiquated to the modern reader, they represent scientific truths to the rational medieval one. Moreover, many

45 For the same reason, Maimonides repeats in *Guide* 3.43 the allegoric reason for the commandment to sound the shofar on the New Year presented in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 3.4. The shofar is designed to awaken us from our spiritual-moral slumber and call upon us to examine our deeds and repent. The popular alternative in this case would be to regard the sounding of the shofar as a way of awakening the Deity, based on an anthropomorphic conception of God, or as a means of chasing away Satan and the demons. Maimonides' explanation provides a much better alternative to these views from the perspective of his theology.

46 *Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, volume 2, ed. Jacob Lev Levy (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1997), 361-372.

47 See *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 355-358.

48 *Sefer ha-Batim*, 119-133. HaKokhavi follows Halevi in stressing also the hidden affects of the order of sacrifice on the soul of the individual.

of these thinkers were convinced that the basic structure of the world as conceived by Aristotle came close to being demonstrative. Hence the truths conveyed by the Sanctuary in their view were eternal ones. While progress would continue to be made in many important details of the various sciences, none of these thinkers entertained the notion that Aristotle's physics and metaphysics would one day be rejected on rational grounds.⁴⁹

The second type of explanation taken from Ibn Ezra, which plays a prominent role in the approach to the commandments among many of the Jewish philosophers of Provence, is one that is not advanced at all by Maimonides. This type of explanation is anchored in what today we would call the "occult sciences," but Ibn Ezra would consider them to be practical sciences—astrology and sciences dealing with the special properties of objects.⁵⁰ Ibn Ezra's treatment of the breastplate (*ḥosben*) worn by the high priest that was employed to answer questions about whether a certain course of action should be undertaken suggests that he viewed it as an astrolabe.⁵¹ The stones in the breastplate were chosen for their special properties, for example crystal (*aḥlama*) for its ability to induce dreams.⁵² His understanding of some of the laws of incest is

49 When Scholem criticizes the philosophers' approach by pointing out that their explanations of some of the mitzvot "carry with them antiquated moral and philosophical ideas," he is guilty of an anachronism. It is of considerable historical irony that many of the kabbalistic explanations are the product of an imaginative reworking of many of the same philosophical and ethical views maintained by the medieval Aristotelian philosophers. The fact that these explanations continue to be regarded by so many as timeless appears to reflect the victory of imagination over intellect.

50 For the most in-depth treatment of the place of astrology in Ibn Ezra's thought, see Shlomo Sela, *Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham Ibn Ezra's Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) (Heb.); see also Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Some Astrological Themes in the Thought of Abraham Ibn Ezra," in *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Jay Harris (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 28-85. For a study of astrology in medieval Jewish thought, see Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) (Heb.).

51 See Ibn Ezra's commentary to Exodus 28:7-8. For a discussion of this issue see Sela, *Astrology and Biblical Exegesis in Abraham Ibn Ezra's Thought*, 287-299.

52 See Ibn Ezra's commentary to Exodus 28:9.

rooted in the special properties of the land of Israel.⁵³ One of the reasons he gives for the rest imposed on us on the Sabbath and the prohibition against travel is because of the rule of the evil planets on this day, Mars at night and Saturn during the day. Avoiding activity during this period is a way to protect us from the negative effects of these planets.⁵⁴ Other examples can be brought along these lines.

Many Provençal Jewish philosophers, if not most, were more inclined to take their cue from Ibn Ezra on these matters than from Maimonides. The astrological significance some of the commandments—e.g., the Sabbath being ruled by two evil planets, making a cessation from work highly advisable,⁵⁵ identifying the breastplate worn by the High Priest as an astrolabe—is a theme that recurs in the writings of a number of thinkers. They viewed these explanations as naturalistic ones, while conceding that the scientific reasons for the efficacy of certain practices and objects are not always understood. Often they can to be discerned only by experience. This is not unlike the practical science of medicine, particularly regarding the efficacy of many drugs.⁵⁶ Halevi had already employed the medical analogy, God being the expert physician, to explain the beneficial effects of the Divine Law in contrast to other legislations.⁵⁷ He appears to have in mind the direct influence of the commandments on the soul in a manner indiscernible by human reason. This is seen in his description of the salutary effects sacrifices have on the soul, often in complete opposition to the expectations of reason.⁵⁸ The explanations offered by some of the Provençal Jewish philosophers are less mystical and more scientific in nature. Many of the commandments whose reasons are not easily understood are seen as affecting one's physical disposition, which in

53 See Ibn Ezra's commentary to Leviticus 18:26; Deuteronomy 31:16.

54 See Howard Kreisel, "The Sabbath in Medieval Jewish Philosophy: From the Supernatural to the Natural," in *Sabbath: Idea History Reality*, ed. Gerald Blidstein (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2004), 69-75 (Heb.).

55 See *ibid.*, 75-79.

56 See, for example, Nissim's explanation of the reason for the law of the red heifer brought above, chapter 6, 197-198.

57 See *Kuzari* 1.79.

58 *Kuzari* 4.15; see also 3.23.

turn affects the powers of the soul. The incense burnt in the Sanctuary, for example, is seen as purifying the vapors that enter the body, helping to sharpen one's intellect and induce prophecy. Music too helps to create the proper balance between the humors necessary for receiving this emanation. In general, the offering of sacrifice is connected with the *praxis* of attaining prophecy.⁵⁹

Even commandments that suggest supernatural divine intervention are given naturalistic explanations by at least some of the Provençal philosophers. Nissim, the most radical naturalist among this group, offers a naturalistic explanation to explain the efficacy of the unusual ceremony to which a woman suspected of adultery is subjected in order to reveal whether she in fact is guilty of the crime, as well as how the adulterer also suffers his just punishment.⁶⁰ Moreover, no allusion is made to leprosy as a supernatural disease for slander but rather as a physically contagious one.⁶¹ In explaining leprosy appearing on the walls of a house, Nissim treats it as a form of mould that results from rancid air and adversely affects the occupants of the dwelling. This phenomenon he notes can still be found in Arab lands.⁶² Gersonides offers a similar explanation in his commentary to Leviticus 13:47. In general, many of the laws of impurity and of purification are seen as related to combating physical contagion, impurity not being simply a "fancied notion" referring to touching things held as unpleasant or disgusting, as Maimonides describes it.⁶³ Dead bodies actually physically contaminate things with which they are in contact and many of

59 See *Sefer ha-Batim*, 130-131; *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 347; Gersonides' commentary to Genesis 6-9, Lesson 10 (*Perushei Ralbag 'al HaTorah*, volume 1, ed. Jacob Lev Levy [Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook 1992], 92-3). Gersonides shows also how the contemplation of the allegoric significance of sacrifice stimulates the intellect and prepares it for prophecy.

60 See *Ma'aseh Nissim*, 399-400.

61 *Ibid.*, 374-375.

62 *Ibid.*, 378. As for the ceremony of one who is purified from leprosy, he offers primarily an allegorical explanation.

63 *Guide* 3.47.

the commandments are designed to protect from this contamination or to cleanse it.⁶⁴

Levi ben Avraham

I would like to focus now on the Provençal thinker who presents one of the most extensive discussions of the reasons for the commandments, Levi ben Avraham. In the section titled “The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah,” in the second part of his monumental encyclopedia *Livyat Hēn*,⁶⁵ Levi devotes fourteen chapters to this subject (chapters 13-26).⁶⁶ He is of the opinion that this topic in fact belongs to the secrets of the Torah. As is the case with other secrets, the time is now ripe to reveal this one. In his view, in order to achieve the goals for which the commandments were intended, one must observe them with the proper intent, which requires knowing their reasons.

Levi opens his discussion by presenting the Maimonidean idea of the equibalance of the commandments, in which there is no deficiency or excess, and which guide the individual in accordance with the just middle path while avoiding the opposing extremes of laxity and overly burdensome restrictions. Insofar as the Torah is perfect, and within each species what is perfect is unique, the Torah will never undergo any abrogation or change, and no divine law will ever replace it.⁶⁷ Levi goes so far as to liken the immutability and uniqueness of the Torah to that of God.

In the following chapter, the commandments are divided by him in different ways, many of the divisions revolving around the Maimonidean notion that the purpose of the Torah is to promote the welfare of

64 See, for example, *Sefer ha-Batim*, 176. Allegoric reasons are also adduced for understanding the laws of purity and purification. See in particular Gersonides’ discussion of these laws immediately following his commentary to Leviticus 11:46.

65 For a discussion of Levi and his encyclopedia see above, chapter 5.

66 Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hēn: The Quality of Prophecy and the Secrets of the Torah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2007), 304-622 (Heb.).

67 *Ibid.*, 305; cf. *Guide* 2.39. While Maimonides’ discussion suggests that the perfect specimen must be unique, since there cannot be two completely identical yet distinct members of a species, this argument in reference to the Torah is made explicit by Anatoli in *Mamad ha-Talmidim*, 191a-b.

the body and the welfare of the soul.⁶⁸ For example, one of the divisions is between *mishpatim*, which come to promote peace and justice in the world, and the “commandments of the heart,” which come to perfect the soul. Levi is of the opinion that the individual who lives in isolation does not require the first category of commandments, nor do the pure individuals who have no desire to harm others. He brings as an example the inhabitants of India who, according to one of the tales told about them, live together in perfect harmony without any legal code, courts, or police—a tale whose apparent origin is one of the versions of *The Gestes of Alexander of Macedon*, which was very popular in the Middle Ages.⁶⁹ This natural trait, however, does not pertain to the Israelites, hence their need for such laws. Another division, which he attributes to Maimonides, involves three main categories: those involving moral virtues, those involving beliefs, and those involving actions. Among the actions, some come to preserve a true belief (e.g., the Sabbath) or to eliminate a false one (e.g., sacrifices), and some come as symbolic actions pointing to moral lessons (e.g., the red heifer), or to theoretical truths involving God and the world (e.g., the menorah in the Sanctuary). Others come to leave a positive impress on the soul of the individual (e.g., awe of the Sanctuary).⁷⁰

Levi then devotes twelve chapters to different commandments or groups of commandments. The topics alone indicate where his major concerns lie. The order is as follows: 1) commandments whose purpose is to inculcate noble moral traits (in which he deals with forbidden foods and laws of purification as well as charitable gifts); 2) commandments concerning incest, circumcision, and vows; 3) the sale of houses in walled cities, the red heifer, and cities of refuge; 4) commandments whose purpose is to eradicate idolatry; 5) commandments whose

68 *Guide* 3.27.

69 Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 324-342. Moses Ibn Tibbon brings this tale in his *Ma'amar ha-Taninim*, which probably served as Levi's immediate source. See *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 239. For a discussion of this tale and the sources in which it appears, see *ibid.*, note 54. It should be noted that a version of the *Gestes* was translated into Hebrew as early as the beginning of the thirteenth century.

70 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 354.

purpose is to honor the Holy Sanctuary; 6) commandments whose purpose is to strengthen the faith; 7) Sabbath and Festivals; 8) commandments whose purpose is to hint at matters of wisdom or to stimulate us to learn; 9) the Tabernacle and its Utensils 10) the altar 11) the structure of the Sanctuary 12) the Vestments of the High Priest.⁷¹ Levi's discussion of the commandments is designed more as a supplement to Maimonides' discussion than an alternative to it. While he does not attempt to deal with the reasons for each of the commandments or to organize them systematically, his encyclopedic tendency finds its expression in the multiple reasons he presents for the various commandments and their details with which he deals. Moreover, much of his discussion is devoted to the citation and explication of rabbinic *midrashim* pertaining to the commandments, in an attempt to understand them along philosophic-scientific lines. As in the case of Maimonides, he distinguishes between homiletic explanations and those that he feels uncover the true intent of the commandment.⁷²

Naturalistic and allegorical reasons dominate Levi's approach. As is the case with many of his contemporaries in Provence, Levi views astrology as a practical science, hence he sees astrologic reasons underlying a number of the commandments, such as the Sabbath, the breastplate of the High Priest, and even the reason for the date of the High Holidays.⁷³ On this point he too is far more influenced by the approach of Ibn Ezra than that of Maimonides.⁷⁴ While he does not reject Maimonides' historical-anthropological explanation of many of the commandments, he supplements them with explanations that are ahistorical. In this manner he underscores the trans-historical value of each of the commandments.

We have already seen that Maimonides treats the laws of purity and impurity as based for the most part on a "fancied notion"⁷⁵—an

71 In chapter 27, Levi deals with the significance of numbers—those that characterize some of the commandments, as well as other matters found in the Torah.

72 See above, note 44.

73 *Livyat Hēn: The Quality of Prophecy*, 522-523, 534-535, 556-557, 615-616; see also below.

74 See above, note 51.

75 See above, note 63.

idea based not on reality but on vain imaginings. Maimonides traces many of these imaginings to the Sabians, and argues that the Torah attempts to limit the severity of these laws by confining them primarily to ritual matters and not to everyday life.⁷⁶ In essence, he treats the approach of the Torah to these matters as similar to that of sacrifices. The Torah compromises with the existing situation by legislating laws in harmony with the prevalent views and practices, at the same time that it limits the scope of the practice of these laws. This is also true of laws that do touch upon daily matters, such as the laws concerning menstruating women, which were legislated because of the widely held negative attitude toward menstruation, and in Maimonides' view were much less restrictive than the laws of the Sabians.⁷⁷ Levi, on the other hand, is more interested in downplaying this historical approach. The laws of menstruation, for example, also limit the desire for sexual intercourse.⁷⁸ In addition, menstrual blood is viewed by Levi as poisonous coarse matter, and not simply as something that was deemed unclean in popular imagination. Any newborn that is formed from it will have a bad temperament and be infected, hence the reason for prohibiting intercourse with menstruating women. Levi cites not only a midrash in support of this view,⁷⁹ but also medical scholars.⁸⁰

Levi traces the impurity of dead bodies to their poisonous effect on the surrounding air, which also explains the rabbinic injunction to distance dead carcasses and cemeteries from the city, as well as the biblical prohibition against leaving the body of an executed criminal hanging overnight, in order not *to defile your land* (Deuteronomy 21:23). The air of the Land of Israel in Levi's view is much purer than that of Egypt. For those growing up in Israel, any pollution to its air will result in far greater injury to them than in the case of those who grew up

76 *Guide* 3.47.

77 *Ibid.*

78 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 379-381.

79 *Tanḥuma* (Buber), Metzora', 3.

80 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 388-389. Maimonides himself notes the unhealthy nature of menstrual blood in his *Medical Aphorisms*, Heb. trans. Nathan Hameathi, ed. Suessmann Muntner (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1982), 341.

accustomed to breathe polluted air.⁸¹ Many of the details of the laws of concerning corpses and the utensils that are impurified by them also have a naturalistic explanation that is based on the contamination of the surrounding air. Human corpses produce much more contamination than the dead of other species in his view, hence the more severe restrictions regarding contact with them and the utensils in their vicinity. Levi explains the reason why the same restrictions do not apply to the corpses of Gentiles (or beasts) from two different (and somewhat conflicting) sociological perspectives. On one hand, Jews naturally shy away from the dead bodies of Gentiles as well as beasts, hence there is no need to legislate in this matter; on the other hand, the Gentile dead are buried all over the place, within the city as well as by the side of thoroughfares, making such restrictions impossible to uphold.⁸²

Levi regards leprosy as a highly contagious disease, and not as a supernatural punishment. This is the reason that no exceptions are made in the law to isolate the leper from the community, no matter how noble is the afflicted individual. The notion that leprosy comes to those speaking evil of others is nothing more than a rabbinic homily in his view. The reason for the initial seven days of isolation he traces to the fact that this is the natural length of time for the course of many diseases. The fact that leprosy may be found in the walls of houses is explained by the possibility that the air may transfer the characteristics of this pestilence to them.⁸³

Allegorical reasons are more readily employed to explain the process of purification. Levi adduces explanations of this sort for the purification ceremony of the leper.⁸⁴ Similarly, allegorical explanations are offered for all the details of the law of the red heifer.⁸⁵

81 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 393-394.

82 *Ibid.*, 401-403, 494.

83 *Ibid.*, 400-401

84 *Ibid.*, 497-499.

85 *Ibid.*, 500-502.

Many of the explanations for the commandments already encountered among other Provençal thinkers are contained in Levi's treatise,⁸⁶ from the allegorical understanding of the structure of the Temple and its vessels to the practical effects of aspects of the Temple service in bringing about a purification of the brain, and even prophecy. A naturalistic approach is also presented for the prohibitions concerning agriculture and forbidden foods.

Influences of Levi's Christian milieu at times can also be detected in his discussion of the commandments.⁸⁷ In discussing circumcision, for example, Levi offers the reasons brought by Maimonides: to dampen the sexual drive, and to serve as sign of unity. As opposed to some of the other Provençal philosophers, he does not talk of the diseases associated with the foreskin, perhaps because he, like Maimonides, sensed that such an explanation suggests a defect in God's creation.⁸⁸ There remains, nonetheless, a subtle but significant difference between their approaches. Maimonides writes in an Islamic environment in which Moslems also practice circumcision. Thus for Maimonides circumcision is a sign uniting all those who believe in the unity of God, and he formulates his position accordingly.⁸⁹ Levi, writing in a Christian environment, sees circumcision as a sign uniting Jews and preserving them in their far-flung Diaspora while other nations disappeared, a theme that will reemerge in Spinoza's thought.⁹⁰

Levi's Christian milieu also has an impact on another significant point in his discussion. He attempts to show the superiority of circumcision over baptism in that the former is a permanent signed impressed upon the flesh. The Christians, however, argue the shortcoming of

86 In some cases, Levi's treatise may well have been their source. Nissim was definitely acquainted with Levi's treatise, though he never mentions the author by name. It appears that the same is true of HaKokhavi.

87 Levi devotes chapter 12 to a polemic against Christianity, showing his awareness of Christian views. For Levi's acquaintance with Christians and Christianity, see Howard Kreisel, "Christian Influences on Levi ben Avraham's *Livyat Hen*," *Studia Hebraica* 6 (2006): 45-53.

88 See above, notes 31, 38-40.

89 *Guide* 3.29. See Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law*, 95-97.

90 See *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 100.

circumcision in that it excludes women.⁹¹ Levi, who was sensitive to this charge, attempts to show the ways in which this commandment has also the woman in mind:

One of the reasons for circumcision is to decrease the [sexual] appetite and weaken the [evil] inclination by diminishing the elemental moisture in the organ, and to sanctify [God] by means of the vessel through which the species endures. This will lead also to the perfection of the woman, for her enjoyment of sex will lessen because of this, as they say: "One having sex with an uncircumcised male finds it difficult to refrain" (Genesis Rabbah 80.11). In addition, the woman is part of the creation of man, a rib of his ribs. She is under his service and dominion, Follows him and is included in his commandments. In man's removal of what is superfluous, the woman removes it too. Moreover, the woman's observance and care taken during the days of her menstruation, her cleansing and purification, take the place of this intent. It is known that the heart is the foremost minister for the power of giving birth. For this reason, diminishing the moisture of the man from the outset purifies his blood, cools down and diminishes his [evil] inclination, calms his nature, refines the power of his intellect, and [leads him to] attain a good temperament. The offspring will then be born with this characteristic, and this nature will be strengthened in his sons and daughters. This commandment thus includes men and women.⁹²

Levi's acquaintance with Christian practices, which he observes from his neighbors, finds its expression in other discussions of the reasons for the commandments. He even sees the Christians as having introduced new holidays in imitation of Jewish ones. For example, in his discussion of the ten days of repentance between the New Year and the Day of Atonement, Levi sees an astrological basis for the idea found in rabbinic literature that this is a period of divine judgment, inasmuch as this is the period of the Fall equinox in which the sun enters into the constellation of Libra, represented by scales of judgment (hence in Hebrew the constellation is termed *moznayim*, meaning scales). In Levi's view, the Christians, seeing that the Jews observed a holiday in this period revolving around God's judgment of the world, decided

91 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 417.

92 *Ibid.*, 416.

to adopt this practice: “And in imitation of us, the gentiles made a holiday in this period for Michael, and they said that he examines souls and weighs their actions.”⁹³ Levi refers here to Michaelmas, named after the archangel Michael, which in the West is celebrated on September 29. Michael is normally depicted as holding scales, and according to Christian belief will blow the great horn on the Day of Judgment and will accompany the souls to the presence of God.

I would like to conclude this section with a lengthy example of Levi’s allegoric understanding of the reasons for one matter pertaining to a number of commandments, which will help to convey a deeper appreciation of his approach. The example is taken from chapter 18, dealing with the commandments whose purpose is to eradicate idolatry. After a lengthy exposition of the reason for sacrifices that basically follows the lines of Maimonides’ approach, Levi turns to the reason for the prohibition of offering leaven and honey in a burnt offering (Leviticus 2:11). He first ties the reason for this prohibition with ancient idolatrous practices, as does Maimonides in *Guide* 3.46, and then continues:

We have already hinted at another reason in the first part of *Batei ha-Nefesh ve-ha-Leḥashim*,⁹⁴ namely that the leaven is sour, cold, and dry, the opposite of honey. Matzah (unleavened bread) too is dry by nature and signifies a lack of appetite for physical pleasures. Leaven alludes to an evil appetite and the strengthening of matter, as it is said: “Who detains us [from performing God’s will]? The leaven in the dough and the subjugation by the nations” [BT Berakhot 17a]. It is also said: *Knead the dough until it is leavened* [Hosea 7:4], that is, until they put into action their evil intentions.⁹⁵

In the case of the first proof text, one may understand by the context that the leaven refers to the evil inclination. The latter proof text, on the other hand, can only be understood by a thorough knowledge of Levi’s source. This is characteristic of his entire composition and cannot simply be explained by the copyist shortening the quotes found in

93 *Ibid.*, 541.

94 For a description of this poem see above, chapter 5, 120-121.

95 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 453-454.

the original version of the treatise, as is often the case. Levi assumes that his readers know the Bible and rabbinic literature by heart and that they can complete the text to which he alludes and thereby understand the point he is making. The beginning of the verse in Hosea 7:4, which he does not explicitly quote, reads as follows: *They are all adulterers, like an oven heated by the baker. He rests from stoking the fire from the time of the kneading of the dough until it is leavened.* With the knowledge of the complete verse, the reference is clear.

Levi next takes up the problem of why leaven is required in the offering of the first fruits, goes on to deal with the reason why leaven is forbidden on Passover, and enters into a brief legal discussion on how the command: *Eliminate the leaven (tashbitu se'or)* (Exodus 12:15) is to be fulfilled, whether by burning or by annulment. He shows that the leaven that one knows about is burnt, while that which remains unknown to the person is annulled. He then adduces the symbolic meaning of both these activities. He concludes this part of his discussion with the following comment:

We find that the prohibition of leaven on Passover alludes to two good intentions: remembering the miracle and removing the superfluous physical desires. The honey hints at overspeculation (*hitpakhmūt*), studying those matters that do not enter the province of the hylic intellect⁹⁶ and looking for demonstrative proof where none is to be found.⁹⁷

Levi goes on to cite a number of verses, most prominently Proverbs 25:16: *Have you found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for you, lest you be sated and vomit it out.* This verse appears in the story in Tractate Ḥagigah of the four who entered *pardes* and is also analyzed by Maimonides in *Guide* 1.32. In short, the intake of honey—that is to say, engaging in speculation—by one who does not have the proper constitution for it may lead to heresy, while the right amount of honey that is suitable for one's digestion is good.

96 In other words, studying matters the human intellect is incapable of understanding.

The hylic intellect refers to the human potential for grasping the intelligibles.

97 *Livyat Hēn: The Quality of Prophecy*, 455; cf. *Guide* 1.32.

Levi continues this line of thought by remarking: “It is the obligation of the individual to investigate the reasons for the Torah and its secrets. For this reason the Torah commanded not to eliminate salt from the sacrifice. It is said:⁹⁸ ‘Can one give it taste as understanding?’⁹⁹ Scripture says: *You should salt it* [Leviticus 2:13]’ [BT Menaḥot 21a].”¹⁰⁰ While the exact meaning of this text has been subject to conflicting interpretations,¹⁰¹ Levi cites it to show that one should pursue the secrets contained in the Torah by means of one’s understanding, which is symbolized by the salt that is applied to the sacrifice. Salt, Levi also points out, is a symbol for the covenant. What follows is a discourse on the need to pursue wisdom.

In this manner, the discussion continues moving between details of the commandments and the moral and theoretical lessons they are designed to stimulate in those who ponder them. Numerous discussions regarding different commandments follow this pattern in Levi’s treatise. The reader of *Livyat Hen* may be tempted to conclude that what we are dealing with here is simply homilies on homilies, that is to say, Levi’s homilies on rabbinic homilies. This misses the point. Levi feels that his expositions capture an important dimension of the biblical texts themselves, texts that the Sages only partially illuminated by their expositions, and which Levi is further illuminating by his. All these expositions are part of the original intent of the text. I would say that his approach has an element that anticipates the approach of Samson Raphael Hirsch in modern times.¹⁰² Yet it should be noted that

98 The discussion there deals with the salt that is to be applied to the sacrifice, in the course of which the Sages define *tevunehu*, a term appearing in a *baraita* that is used in reference to the manner salt should *not* be applied

99 In Hebrew: יכול יתן בו טעם כבינה.

100 *Livyat Hen: The Quality of Prophecy*, 455.

101 Rashi explains the question: Can you give it taste just as understanding gives a person distinction? This apparently means to immerse it in salt. According to the *Arukh* by Nathan ben Yehiel: Can you give it a taste of discernment (reading *tevunab* rather than *ke-binab*)—that is, just enough so that the taste of salt can be discerned? Both these sources were known to Levi.

102 See in particular Hirsch’s discussion of symbolism in his essay *Grundlinien einer juedischen Symbolik* published in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Naphtali Hirsch (Frankfurt, 1908-1912), vol. 3, 211-447 (partially translated into English in *Timeless Torah*, ed. Jacob Breuer [New York: Feldheim, 1957], 303-420).

Levi is totally familiar with the standard scientific Hebrew lexicographic works of his period, Yonah Ibn Ghanah's *Book of Roots*, David Kimḥi's treatise by the same name, and Nathan ben Yeḥiel's *Arukh*. He thereby bases his etymological discussions on what would be considered in the Middle Ages a solid linguistic footing. Perhaps more interesting, there are elements in Levi's approach that are reminiscent of some of the kabbalistic approaches to the commandments, at least in form if not in content. This topic deserves further investigation.

While Levi may have gone down in history as a heretical thinker whose treatise was banned by the Rashba, from his discussion we can discern that he was looking for ways to maintain and enhance the value of the commandments. Many of the commandments were converted into symbolic acts, though not theurgic ones,¹⁰³ the appreciation of which required both philosophic study and the study of the entire rabbinic tradition. Whatever one may think of this endeavor, one that weds the prophets and the rabbinic sages to Aristotelian philosophers and occult scientists, at least one thing clearly emerges from the reading of this passage from Levi's treatise. Only one with a profound knowledge and commitment to Jewish law and lore could have written it.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

Let us return to Maimonides. I began this chapter by asking why he includes a discussion of the reasons of the commandments as part of the *Guide*, when the purpose of his treatise as he presents it is to offer an explanation of the secrets of the Torah that are presented in Scripture

103 Some of his naturalistic explanations, on the other hand, would strike today's reader as being essentially magical, since they are predicated on astrological beliefs. On the distinction between natural and magical, see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 618-622.

104 One reading the polemical literature against the philosophic camp in the controversies of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries may come away with the impression that the more radical members of this camp were not well versed in rabbinic tradition. In the case of Levi at least, as well as Nissim, who could be considered even a more radical rationalist, this was definitely not the case. The immersion of these thinkers in rabbinic tradition, and not just those who were known as "moderate" Maimonideans, such as Menahem HaMeiri, deserves a separate study.

in parable form. The reasons for the commandments are not listed by him among the secrets of the Torah, and he explicitly indicates that the commandments are not to be treated as parables. Herbert Davidson has adduced textual evidence in support of his conclusion that Maimonides did not have most of the *Guide* written when he wrote the introduction.¹⁰⁵ If Davidson is correct, the *Guide* may in fact have really been a work in progress, with its final shape taking place in the course of the writing. It follows from this view that Maimonides' lengthy discussion of the commandments may not have been part of his original plan for the treatise. Rather it was the result of a decision in the midst of the work to write a broader theological work and to include additional topics that are crucial for an understanding of the relation between Judaism and Aristotelian philosophy. He felt the need to complete the picture, as it were. What is the overall purpose of the Torah and the reason for its specific commandments, particularly those that appear to have no discernible reason, is certainly a cause for perplexity for one grounded in both traditions, one that calls for an explanation.

One can only hypothesize why Maimonides was boldly willing to offer a historical relativistic view for so many of the commandments in the course of discussing this topic. It should be noted that most, though certainly not all, of the commandments to which his historical explanation applies were not being practiced in Maimonides' time, most notably all the commandments involving the Sanctuary. His explanation suggests that Jews are not worse off for it, though they are certainly worse off in his view for not living in a sovereign Jewish state ruled by Jewish Law.¹⁰⁶ Moreover, his approach to the commandments suggests

105 See Herbert Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 327-334. In Davidson's view, this point helps explain the absence of instances of discernable contradictions in the *Guide*, and the overall absence of any esoteric teachings. As Maimonides continued to write the *Guide*, he changed his mind about introducing contradictions as a writing technique or introducing esoteric teachings. I do not think that Davidson is right concerning the issue of Maimonides' esotericism, but further evidence can be adduced for his basic position that the introduction was written prior to the actual writing of much of the treatise.

106 See, for example, his remarks on living in exile in *Guide* 2.36.

a historic dynamism in which progress could be made in creating a more perfect religion within the framework of Mosaic Law.¹⁰⁷ His repeated insistence that the law is immutable¹⁰⁸ comes to address Maimonides' contemporary concerns. It does not negate the view that he regards these commandments as far from ideal in his own time, let alone in the messianic future.¹⁰⁹ This is not to question his belief in the view that in the time of the messiah all the commandments will again be practiced.¹¹⁰ It is to argue that Maimonides' focus is on the present. He develops a view of the messianic future that best supports what he is trying to accomplish in the here and now amidst the multiple challenges that confront Judaism from within and without.¹¹¹ In regard to the commandments whose rationale is a historical relativistic one and that continued to be practiced in Maimonides' time, religious existential reasons could be substituted for historical ones, as he at times does in the *Mishneh Torah*, in order to maintain their relevance.

It is not without much irony that one of the main charges against the medieval Provençal Jewish philosophers in the controversies that erupted in the first half of the thirteenth century and then at the beginning of the fourteenth century is that they allegorize the Torah and its commandments. In other words they follow the same route taken by the Christians.¹¹² Yet it was not for the purpose of throwing off the yoke

107 One should note also Maimonides' attempts to limit the scope of the Oral Law, which from a legal perspective broadened the scope of laws that could be changed with the reconvening of the Sanhedrin in the messianic period. See Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 21-22.

108 See particularly the ninth principle of faith in his *Commentary on the Mishnah: Introduction to Pereq Heleq*.


109 Maimonides alludes to this point when he subtly suggests that were a prophet to come in his own period, he would not command sacrifices; see *Guide* 3.32.

110 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings and their Wars 11.1.

111 See above, chapter 2, 38-39.

112 This point emerges clearly from the letters accompanying R. Solomon Ibn Adret's ban against the allegorical preachers, signaling out Levi; see Abba Mari of Lunel, *Sefer Minhbat Qena'ot*, ed. Haim Z. Dimitrovsky (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1990), 726-737. For a study of the conflict over philosophical allegorization in Provence in its social context see Ram Ben-Shalom, "Communication and Propaganda between Provence and Spain: The Controversy over Extreme Allegorization (1303-1306)," in *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora*, ed. Sophia Menache (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 171-177.

of the Law that they bring allegorical explanations or that they continuously strive to look for naturalistic ones, but in order to underscore the eternal relevance of each of the commandments as against Maimonides' historical relativism. It is Maimonides in this area who was in reality the most radical of Maimonideans.



From Dialogue to Contemplation: The Transformation of the Meaning of Prayer in Maimonides and the Medieval Jewish Philosophers of Provence

Introduction

In an exceptional treatise written in Provence at the beginning of the fourteenth century, *Ma'aseh Nissim* by Nissim of Marseille, its author devotes part of his discussion of providence to an explanation of the significance of prayer.¹ He writes as follows:

I heard of one who included another form of providence and safeguarding to those we mentioned—the attainment of foreknowledge, which enables one to plan how to save oneself from fortuitous occurrences. Indeed, to my way of thinking this is not very far from common sense. Namely, they say that when the soul of a person conjoins with God by way of prayer and by fully concentrating on wisdom [or science], the spirit of understanding comes about [in him]. Due to this faculty, which leads the body and the faculties of the soul as a whole, the person will endeavor [to save himself]. Even when he falls ill and is at the threshold of death, he will arouse himself to pray to God and conjoin with Him, and depict [in his mind] the intelligibles and recall the wonders of the Creator and His actions. By transforming his potential intellect to an actual one, he

1 On the author and his treatise, see above, chapter 6.

strengthens his natural power and may be saved. Potentiality is incomplete existence and actuality is complete existence. An intellect in actuality comes about in one who meditates, which [in turn] disseminates in his soul a lofty power. He receives a new emanation that he did not possess from the outset when his intellect was in *potentia*. Therefore, it is not implausible that his soul as a whole will be strengthened. For the human soul is a single soul possessing many activities.² It—that is to say, the human soul—emanates from the Active Intellect. Therefore, when there comes about an increment in the emanation from it to the human soul, the power of the soul as a whole is strengthened in all of its activities. . . .

If you should say: it follows from this that the human being will have a greater lifespan and fewer diseases than any other living species, yet we see that the opposite is true. Namely, there are species that have a greater lifespan, and on the whole, they all have fewer diseases than human beings. Moreover, sometimes we find a simpleton who is always healthy and a wise person in poor health. We will answer you: there are diverse reasons for this, such as the difference in temperaments as well as physical makeups that vary in strength and weakness. There are those easily affected [by external matters], and others [affected] with difficulty. But if one posits two individuals with identical temperaments who are stricken by the same illness of equal severity at the same time, and they arrive at the threshold of death, and one represents to himself and mulls over the vanities of the world, its illusions and things that pollute the intellect and darken its light, and the other represents in his heart the wonders of the Creator and abandons all other thoughts, and he prays to Him, and transforms his intellect from a potential one to an actual one, and is strengthened by what he grasps of the intelligibles—it is not implausible to claim that the one on whose soul emanates a divine emanation, and the spirit of understanding comes about in him, and his intellect becomes actual after being a potential one, that the power of his soul as a whole will strengthen more than that of the person who is of the opposite description. Maimonides wrote in the second part [of the *Guide of the Perplexed*], chapter thirty-eight, regarding the faculty of divination and the faculty of courage as follows: “When the intellect emanates upon these two faculties they become greatly strengthened,” in addition to the imagination. For the traits [of the soul] and the imagination leave a recognizable impress upon natural things. The individual’s confidence by virtue of his prayer will help him. So the first individual will die, while the power of the second will be strengthened

2 This is the view of Aristotle. See Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*, chapter 1.

and he will be saved and return to his well-ordered affairs and live a long life.

According to this view, it is fitting for our entire nation to pray constantly in times of crisis more than other nations, even though they [the other nations] ridicule us for this, considering it the way of women, and of no value. You know that it is a positive commandment to pray at a time of crisis.³ It is possible, as we have indicated, that by strengthening the faculty of the intellect, all the faculties of the soul will be strengthened, and that what was at first hidden will be revealed to them, as well as the way of being saved. Moreover, it is possible that someone will receive something akin to the power of prophecy, enabling him to know what will happen. In addition, their power will be strengthened by their confidence and the hope instilled by their prayer, and they will fight mightily with [all] their heart and soul against the enemy that oppresses them. Everything that the Torah commanded is for our benefit. As Plato noted: “We are incapable of understanding, and our intellects fall short [in grasping] what the [divine] laws convey to us.”⁴

Our Sages said in the chapter “When the Trial has Ended”: “He below who devotes his strength to prayer has no enemies on high . . . and all who are on high augment his strength” [BT Sanhedrin 44b]. It is possible that they hinted by this to what we have already indicated—that [when he prays] he then strives with all the power of his soul to attain the emanation from on high. For this reason [the words for] prayer (*tefillah*) and supplication (*taḥanun*) are in the reflexive form. One says: *mitpallel*, and it is written: *va-etḥannan* to God [Deuteronomy 3:23]. Our Sages said: “*Va-etḥannan*. It should be [written] *va-eḥannan* [intensive form of the verb]! This teaches us that Moses made himself into supplications to God.”⁵ It is possible that for this reason it is written: *In all places where I cause my name*

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- 3 See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 1.36; cf. *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Fasting 1.1. Maimonides subsumes this obligation under the Torah commandment to sound the trumpets in the Temple during the offering of sacrifices, as well as when evils befall us; see *Book of Commandments*, positive commandment 59. For a discussion of this obligation, see below.
 - 4 This dictum, based on Plato’s *Apology* 20d-e, was popular in medieval Arabic and Hebrew literature. Halevi brings a variation of it in *Kuzari* 4.13 and 5.14. Nissim’s formulation is closest to the one found in the Hebrew translation of the Arabic philosophical treatise, *Moznei ha-Iyyunim*, chapter 11, with which he was acquainted, and which he (wrongly) ascribes to Averroes based on Levi ben Avraham’s *Livyat Hēn*; see above, chapter 8, 304-305.
 - 5 I was not able to locate the rabbinic source of this citation. Nissim apparently borrowed this citation from Levi ben Avraham; see below. For a similar midrash see BT Sanhedrin 44a; Deuteronomy Rabbah 2.4.

to be pronounced, I will come to you and bless you [Exodus 20:21]. Our Sages said regarding David: “The entire time that his mouth did not cease from learning, the Angel of Death had no dominion over him.”⁶ Our Sages also said: “Prayers were instituted in place of the daily sacrifices” [BT Berakhot 26b]. The sacrifices came to arouse and awaken the power of prophecy, and to strengthen the faculty of the intellect and the faculties of imagination and divination. Similarly, prayer comes to strengthen the power of the soul: either in the manner that they [the sacrifices] did, or by strengthening his natural power in order to save him from illness, or by strengthening his [faculty of] divination and imagination by turning his thought to the matter [at hand] and pondering it constantly. The perfect good imagination will move a person to choose the good path in all matters to which the representation of the intellect does not extend. For this reason, one who prays with the proper intent does not fail for the most part. The essence of prayer is the intent, not the movement of the lips while the heart is not at one with them, troubled instead by illusory matters and the vanities of the world, for then there will not come to him an emanation and supernal power. For this reason David said: *and renew a steadfast spirit in me* [Psalms 51:12], since a new power and a steadfast spirit will come about in one who prays with intent.

Because of all these ways [regarding the efficacy of prayer] that complement the intellect, how much injustice to his soul and body is inflicted by one who is negligent and lenient concerning prayer! In addition—that is to say, regarding prayer—his heart will then not become haughty. This will inhibit his appetitive soul, and he will remember all of God’s acts of loving-kindness in all the goods bestowed upon him.⁷

The connection between one’s character traits, prayer and foretelling the future was presented by Nissim also earlier in his treatise, in the context of dealing with the rewards promised by the Torah for observing its commandments:

6 Nissim paraphrases from the story found in BT Shabbat 30b.

7 Nissim of Marseille, *Ma’aseh Nissim*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 2000), chapter 13, 196-199 (Heb.). All translations in this chapter are my own, except for those from the *Guide of the Perplexed*, which are taken from the translation of Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). For further statements of Nissim on prayer, see *Ma’aseh Nissim*, 290, 292.

There is a person who is better prepared for this than others—either by nature or by his traits and behavior—and is aided in this by his abandonment of the affairs of the lower world and its pleasures and imaginary honor. He is forbearing and does not disturb his senses and his imagination with the vanities of the world. As a result, it is possible that a power reaches him akin to the power of prophecy regarding some occurrence soon to take place, so he can seek mercy concerning it, as though the future occurrence arouses him to this. The person in question will not strive for that which cannot be attained by him, because his imagination will not arouse him to it. His imagination will arouse him to strive only for that which can be attained by him. So it may occur that when he prays the heavens will give rain and a cure will soon come to the sick, and if this worshipper is a prophet, he will learn and divine the future concerning these matters.⁸

As can be seen from his discussion, Nissim draws an integral connection between prayer and the contemplation of the intelligibles—the eternal truths regarding God and the structure of the world—which characterizes human perfection. Furthermore, he suggests three reasons for the efficacy of prayer in attaining what is beseeched. 1) Prayer results in the reception of an emanation from the Active Intellect that strengthens the intellect of the worshipper together with other faculties of his soul, such as imagination and courage. As a result, the worshipper by his own enhanced powers may overcome illness, defeat his enemies, etc. 2) Conjunction with the supernal world (i.e., the Active Intellect) may come about as a result of prayer, which in turn leads to prophecy, or to a similar phenomenon, enabling the person to divine the future and take the necessary steps to attain his objective—conjunction, prophecy, and the ability to foretell the future being regarded by Nissim as natural phenomena.⁹ 3) Prayer humbles the spirit of the worshipper by reminding him of his nature and the superiority of the Creator. It thereby brings about in him extreme humility, which is critical for the welfare of his soul and body, by curbing his physical inclinations.

⁸ *Ma'aseh Nissim*, chapter 10, 121-122.

⁹ For a discussion of this issue, see above, chapter 6, 185-190.

In Nissim's discussions of the reasons for prayer, God's direct activity is conspicuous by its absence. There is no mention of God hearing the worshipper and granting him his request, or taking delight in the praises uttered by the worshipper and rewarding him accordingly. Despite the fact that prayer is addressed to God, God plays no active role vis-à-vis the worshipper aside from being the object of contemplation and the ultimate source of the constant emanation that the worshipper in a naturalistic manner prepares himself to receive. Completely missing here is any allusion to the traditional conception of the nature of prayer.

We can succinctly summarize the primary reason that Nissim presents an approach that is far different than that of the Sages—the penetration of Aristotelian-Neoplatonic philosophy in its Arabic form into medieval Jewish thought. Nissim, as is the case with an entire circle of Western European Jewish intellectuals in the Middle Ages, accepted the Aristotelian view of God as a completely unchanging deity, who is not cognizant of individuals as they exist in history and is not effected by any external factors, and consequently the world behaves solely in accordance with natural law. God is the First Cause of all that occurs in the world, but not the immediate one. According to the Aristotelian worldview, a deity who is cognizant of individuals, hears their prayers and answers them, is inevitably a deity whose essence is composed of different thoughts, whose knowledge and will continuously change, and who acts in accordance with external influences—in short, a deity who is not the absolute One and the unchanging First Cause as proven by the philosophers. For the Jewish thinker who sought to remain loyal to the Torah and its commandments while accepting the Aristotelian view of God, a different significance to prayer had to be found to replace the one rooted in the notion of a personal deity.

Even medieval Jewish thinkers who did not adopt such an extreme position negating any connection between God and human beings in history were often influenced by philosophic ideas, which led them to grasp prayer in a different manner than in earlier periods. Special attention was paid to the idea of an ontological conjunction between the

human soul and the higher realm, and the need for a process of purification of the soul in order to reach this supreme state. No less important was the idea of an impersonal constant emanation of forces from the supernal world upon everything in the sublunar world that is prepared to receive them. According to this view, the types of reward depicted in biblical and rabbinic literature held little value in comparison to the pleasure experienced by the soul in its union with the supernal world. Any reason given to the commandments in general and to prayer in particular is secondary to their function in purifying the soul in order to attain this state.

This approach can be readily discerned in the thought of Judah Halevi, despite his rejection of the approach of the Aristotelian philosophers.¹⁰ In the third part of *Kuzari*, he presents an extensive discussion of the nature and significance of prayer in the life of the pious individual. He depicts prayer as a summoning by the faculty of intellect belonging to the pious individual of all the senses and other faculties of the soul, after providing each of them with its needs, in order that they should “aid him to conjoin with the level above it, namely the divine level, which is above the level of the intellect.”¹¹ Halevi describes this level as one of conjunction with *al-Amr al-Ilāhī* (the Divine Matter), and goes on to elaborate upon the manner in which prayer leads to it.¹² Halevi’s description of the activity of *al-Amr al-Ilāhī* is reminiscent of the philosophers’ description of the activity of the Active Intellect. Halevi himself points out the similarity between them: “*Al-Amr al-Ilāhī* awaits one who is worthy to conjoin with it, and to be for him a lord, as in the case of the prophets and pious, just as the Intellect awaits all those whose natures are perfected and whose soul and character traits

10 On Halevi’s dialectical relationship with Aristotelian philosophy, see Howard Kreisel, “Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*: Between the God of Abraham and the God of Aristotle,” in *Joodse filosofie tussen rede en traditie*, ed. Reinier Munk and F. J. Hoogewould (Kampen: Kok, 1993), 24-34.

11 *Kuzari* 3.5.

12 Ibid. 3.11-17. Halevi’s conception of *al-Amr al-Ilāhī* has been the source of conflicting scholarly interpretations. For a discussion of this issue, see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 136-140.

are well balanced, in order that it will alight upon them in a perfect manner, as in the case of the philosophers.”¹³

If many of the thinkers who maintained the view of a personal deity who intervenes in nature approached prayer primarily as an activity of contemplation and preparation for conjunction, and not one which primarily consists of talking to God, all the more so is this the case with those thinkers who did not think that God was at all capable of listening to the speech of human beings. Yet even among the circle of Jewish intellectuals that adopted the Aristotelian worldview and hinted at this conclusion, Nissim’s discussion of prayer remains exceptional in the explicitness of its philosophical approach.

Maimonides

As is true of all the Jewish philosophers of Provence, the most formative influence on Nissim’s thought was exercised by Maimonides. Maimonides deals with the meaning of prayer in several passages in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, and his approach to this topic has drawn the attention of a number of scholars.¹⁴ The interpretations of Maimonides’ approach in large measure are dependent upon the question of the extent to which he accepted the Aristotelian worldview regarding all that pertains to the relationship between God and the world. As we have seen in several of the previous chapters, differences of opinion regarding the answer to this question characterize the history of the interpretation of Maimonides’ thought from the very beginning of the dissemination of his writings, and these differences are conspicuous

¹³ *Kuzari* 2.14.

¹⁴ See in particular Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995). Benor deals also with the interpretations of earlier scholars such as Marvin Fox and Oliver Leaman. See also Isadore Twersky, “And One Should Regard Oneself as if Facing the Lord’: Intention in Prayer according to Maimonides,” in *Knesset Ezra: Literature and Life in the Synagogue*, ed. Shulamit Elizur, M. D. Herr, Gershon Shaked, and Avigdor Shinan (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1994), 47-67 (Heb.); Gerald Blidstein, *Prayer in Maimonidean Halakha* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 77-122 (Heb.). Maimonides’ description in *Guide* 3.51 of the prayer of one aspiring to the perfection of the intellect has served as a focal point for much of the scholarly analysis of his approach; for a further discussion of this issue, see below.

even among the medieval disciples of Maimonides in Provence.¹⁵ It appears to me that a careful reading of Maimonides' writings strengthens the hypothesis that at the foundation of his teachings stands the Aristotelian philosophic view of the Deity,¹⁶ and his approach to prayer stems from this view. Maimonides sees in prayer primarily a stimulus to contemplation and the attainment of the supreme truths on the part of the intellectual elite. As for the masses, it serves to strengthen their belief in God. The view that God listens to prayers and answers them, when interpreted literally, is essentially a myth intended for the masses, though it is a philosophic myth that is true in a non-literal sense. In the present context I will bring only a general outline of this interpretation of Maimonides' understanding of prayer.

The most famous and controversial passage regarding prayer is Maimonides' comment on this subject in *Guide* 3.32, mentioned in the course of his discussion of sacrifices.¹⁷ He regards sacrifices as a form of historical compromise reflecting God's "gracious ruse" in devising a way to wean the Israelites away from false beliefs and the practices that reinforce them to true beliefs and superior practices. At the time of the Giving of the Torah, sacrifices were the universal means of worshipping the stars, who were considered to be gods by all the nations of the world. God did not demand of Israel to abandon completely the modes of worship to which they were accustomed, "for a sudden transition from one opposite to another is impossible. And therefore man, according to his nature, is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which he was accustomed" (526). Maimonides goes on to explain:

15 For studies dealing with this issue see, for example, Aviezer Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 87-123; Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 50-79 (Heb.). For a discussion of the esoteric interpretation of Maimonides through the ages, see in particular Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Secrets of the *Guide of the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries," in *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 159-207.

16 This is the basic position that I have argued throughout this volume. For a summary of my position, see *Maimonides' Political Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 1-23.

17 See above, chapter 10, 366.

His wisdom, may He be exalted, and His gracious ruse, which is manifest in regard to all His creatures, did not require that He give us a Law prescribing the rejection, abandonment, and abolition of all these kinds of worship. For one could not then conceive the acceptance of [such a Law], considering the nature of man, which always likes that to which it is accustomed. At that time this would have been similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times who, calling upon the people to worship God, would say: “God has given you a Law forbidding you to pray to Him, to fast, to call upon Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist solely in meditation without any works at all.” (Ibid.)

According to Maimonides, God does not tamper with human nature to prepare humanity to reach the desired state immediately. Rather, He commands them in conformity with their nature, taking under consideration their long held beliefs and ingrained practices. The implication of Maimonides’ comment is that prayer in its legal form and content is also a form of “gracious ruse”—not one that is historically relative, as are sacrifices, but one that still takes under consideration the beliefs of the masses. There is an ideal form to worship God, which consists of the pure contemplation of Him and His acts—i.e., the structure of the world.

The first intention of the Law, according to Maimonides, is “the apprehension of God and the rejection of idolatry” (527). Sacrifices pertain to the “second intention”—that is to say, acts that are crucial in light of historical circumstances for removing the obstacles to attain the first intention, though they are not desirable in themselves. If God had not enjoined sacrifice, the nation would continue to sacrifice to other god because of their being accustomed to this form of worship. Instead, the Torah commands this mode of worship but transfers it from the planets to God. Maimonides implies that if it were not for this historical circumstance, one that is no longer relevant to his own period, God would not have commanded sacrifices at all.¹⁸ The evidence that Maimonides brings to show that they belong to the second intention,

18 This is not to imply that Maimonides secretly advocates the abolition of sacrifices in the messianic period, as some of the German Jewish Reformers sought to interpret him; see George Y. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides’ Philosophy in 19th Century*

and not the first, is the fact that the Torah restricts sacrifices to a single place, only in the period in which there is a Temple, and allows only the priests to perform this activity. This shows that the Torah seeks to make the people less dependent upon sacrifices as a mode of worship in their daily lives. “Invocation, prayer, and similar practices and modes of worship,” on the other hand, “come closer to the first intention and are necessary for its achievement” (527). Therefore, Maimonides argues, prayer is permitted everywhere and enjoined upon everyone.¹⁹

Maimonides is very careful in his formulation. Prayer comes “closer” to the first intention and is in fact necessary for its attainment on the part of the masses, presumably throughout history, but it is not the first intention itself. The continuous contemplation of God on the basis of true opinions is the final purpose of the Torah, and also that of human beings *qua* human beings. This notion is presented in many passages in Maimonides’ writings and not only in the *Guide of the Perplexed*.²⁰

The notion that prayer is close to the first intention but far from the ideal emerges from yet another passage in which this subject is mentioned. In Maimonides’ discussion of divine attributes in chapter fifty-nine of the first part of his treatise, he insists that one must not ascribe to God any positive attributes. God can only be described by negative attributes or by attributes of action. In light of this position, he writes:

The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms: *Silence is praise to You* [Psalms 65:2], which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to You is praise. This is a most perfectly put phrase regarding this matter. For of whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, and on the other we perceive in it some deficiency. Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more

Germany: The Guide to Religious Reform (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), index: sacrifices. I discuss the reason why this is not the case in chapter 2, 26-29.

19 Prayer is considered by Maimonides to be a commandment of the Torah and not simply a rabbinic injunction. For a discussion of this issue, see Blidstein, *Prayer in Maimonidean Halakha*, 23-68.

20 See, for example, *Guide* 1.1; 3.8: 27, 51, 54; *Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishneh; Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 4.8-13.

appropriate—just as the perfect ones have enjoined when they said: *Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah.* You also know their famous dictum—would that all dicta were like it. I shall quote it to you textually, even though it is well remembered, so as to draw your attention to the various significations it expresses. They have said: “Someone who came into the presence of Rabbi Ḥaninah said [in prayer]: God the Great, the Valiant, the Terrible, the Mighty, the Strong, the Tremendous, the Powerful. Thereupon [Rabbi Ḥaninah] said to him: Have you finished all the praises of your Master? Even as regards the first three epithets [used by you], we could not have uttered them if Moses our Master had not pronounced them in the Law and if the men of the Great Synagogue had not [subsequently] come and established [their use] in prayer. And you come and say all this. What does this resemble? It is as if a mortal king who had millions of gold pieces were praised for possessing silver. Would this not be an offense to him” [BT Berakhot 33b]? Here ends the dictum of the perfect one. Consider in the first place his reluctance and unwillingness to multiply the affirmative attributes. Consider also that he has stated clearly that if we were left only to our intellects we should never have mentioned these attributes or stated a thing appertaining to them. Yet the necessity to address men in such terms as would make them achieve some representation—in accordance with the dictum of the Sages: “The Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man” [BT Yevamot 71a]—obliged resort to predicating of God their own perfections when speaking to them. It must then be our purpose to draw a line at using these expressions and not to apply them to Him except only in reading the Torah. However, as the men of the Great Synagogue, who were prophets, appeared in their turn and inserted the mention of these attributes in the prayer, it is our purpose to pronounce only these attributes when saying our prayers. According to the spirit, this dictum makes it clear that, as it happened, two necessary obligations determined our naming these attributes in our prayers: one of them is that they occur in the Torah, and the other is that the prophets in question used them in the prayer they composed. Accordingly, we should not have mentioned these attributes at all but for the first necessary obligation; and but for the second necessity, we should not have taken them out of their context and should not have had recourse to them in our prayers, while you continue to use [in prayer additional] attributes. (139-141)

This passage nicely reflects the position that Maimonides later brings in *Guide* 3.32. The contemplation of God’s negative attributes and

attributes of action—i.e., the structure of the world and the interconnection of all its parts—is the true praise of God and the profoundest “prayer.” Nevertheless, there is a necessity to compromise with the intellectual capacities of the masses. The descriptions of God in Scripture and in the fixed formula of prayer established by the Sages are the result of this compromise. Those leading the prayer service should rest satisfied with this compromise and not multiply God’s attributes, for otherwise they contribute to the erroneous inclination of the masses to ascribe to God positive attributes. Against this inclination of the masses Maimonides fought his entire life, even with legal instruments that he had at his disposal as a rabbinic authority.²¹

Maimonides continues his discussion by presenting a biting critique of a prominent trend that he discerns in his own period, which further supports this false conception of God—namely, the sermons and religious poems that entered into the prayer service:

Thus what we do is not like what is done by the truly ignorant who spoke at great length and spent great efforts on prayers that they composed and on sermons that they compiled and through which they, in their opinion, came nearer to God. In these prayers and sermons they predicate of God qualificative attributions that, if predicated of a human individual, would designate a deficiency in him. For they do not understand those sublime notions that are too strange for the intellects of the vulgar, and accordingly took God, may He be magnified and glorified, for an object of study for their tongues; they predicated attributes of Him and addressed Him in all the terms that they thought permitted and expatiated at such length in this way that in their thoughts they made Him move on account of an affection. They did this especially when they found the text of a prophet’s speech regarding these terms. Thereupon they had full license to bring forward texts that ought to be interpreted in every respect, and to take them according to their external meaning, to derive from them inferences and secondary conclusions, and to found upon them various kinds of discourses. This kind of license is frequently taken by poets and preachers or such as think that what they speak is poetry, so that the utterances of some of them constitute an absolute denial of faith, while other utterances contain such rubbish and such perverse imaginings as to make men laugh when

21 See Maimonides’ *Political Thought*, 196-200.

they hear them, on account of the nature of these utterances, and to make them weep when they consider that these utterances are applied to God, may He be magnified and glorified. (141)²²

In the following chapter, Maimonides explains the philosophical implication of the view that God possesses positive attributes: “I shall not say that he who affirms that God, may He be exalted, has positive attributes either falls short of apprehending Him or is an associator or has an apprehension of Him that is different from what He really is, but I shall say that he has abolished his belief in the existence of the Deity without being aware of it” (*Guide* 1.60: 145). Maimonides’ reasoning is straightforward. Any being who possesses positive attributes cannot be the Deity, so to imagine that the Deity possesses positive attributes is to imagine a non-existent being as the Deity. On the other hand, the true Deity, the absolute One, is not accepted by this person at all. In light of this far-reaching conclusion, one can appreciate Maimonides’ biting critique in chapter fifty-nine of all those who contribute to this false conception.

In his categorization of the commandments in *Guide* 3.35, Maimonides includes the commandment to pray in the ninth class, together with the other commandments that he brings in *Mishneh Torah: Book of Love*. He writes: “The utility of this class is manifest, for it is wholly composed of works that fortify opinions concerning the love of the Deity and what ought to be believed about Him and ascribed to Him” (537). He reiterates this view in his discussion of this class in chapter forty-four. Thus prayer was not established in order to talk to God, according to Maimonides, but rather to think about Him in a certain manner. True love of God, as Maimonides describes it in the *Guide* as well as in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah, results only from the proper philosophical understanding of God and the world.²³ In general, Maimonides offers a startling definition of the category of commandments that are treated by the Sages as being between human

22 On Maimonides’ exceptionally negative attitude toward liturgical poetry, and his willingness to make some compromises on this issue, see Blidstein, *Prayer in Maimonidean Halakha*, 123-149.

23 For a study of this issue, see *Maimonides’ Political Thought*, 225-266.

beings and God: “For every commandment, whether it be a prescription or a prohibition, whose purpose it is to bring about the achievement of certain moral quality or of an opinion or the rightness of actions, which only concerns the individual himself and his becoming more perfect, is call by them [a commandment dealing with the relation] between man and God” (*Guide* 3.35: 538). In this case, too, Maimonides removes the dimension of “relationship” that is seemingly involved in the fulfillment of these commandments, because there cannot be any immediate relationship between God and human beings.

It is true that Maimonides does not appear to negate completely the view of God acting in history, and one may justly claim that many of the prayers are based on this view. Moreover, it appears that Maimonides views prayer not only as a medium to engage in meditation but also as a way to attain God’s help. In chapter thirty-six of the third part of the *Guide*, Maimonides deals with the first class of commandments, which include those that he brings in Laws of Principles of the Torah. These are commandments involving “fundamental opinions,” as Maimonides labels them in chapter thirty-five. To this class of commandments Maimonides attaches the commandment to pray and fast in times of crisis, which is found in an entirely different section of the *Mishneh Torah*—the *Book of Times*, Laws of Fasts. Maimonides explains why in the *Guide* he includes this commandment with those involving fundamental opinions:

In the same way the commandment given to us to call upon Him, may He be exalted, in every calamity—I mean its dictum: *Then you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets* [Numbers 10:9]—likewise belongs to this class. For it is an action through which the correct opinion is firmly established that He, may He be exalted, apprehends our situations and that it depends upon Him to improve them, if we obey, and to make them ruinous, if we disobey; we should not believe that such things are fortuitous and happen by chance. This is the meaning of its dictum: *And if you walk with Me in the way of chance* [Leviticus 26:21], by which it means: if you consider that the calamities with which I cause you to be stricken are to be borne as a mere chance, I shall add for you unto this supposed chance its most grievous and cruel portion. This is the meaning of its dictum: [*And if you] walk with Me in the way of chance, then I will walk with you in*

the way of a furious chance [Leviticus 26:27-28]. For the belief that this is chance contributes to necessitating their persistence in their corrupt opinions and unrighteous actions, so that they do not turn away from them; thus it says: *Thou has stricken them, but they were not affected* [Jeremiah 5:3]. For this reason we have been commanded to invoke Him, may He be exalted, and to turn rapidly toward Him and call out to Him in every misfortune. (*Guide* 3.36: 539-540)

It is important to stress that Maimonides describes the opinion that God apprehends the circumstances of the individuals and can mend them a “correct” or “true” opinion.²⁴ This point contradicts the interpretation I have been advancing till now in regard to Maimonides’ conception of God, as well as his approach to the significance of prayer. Still other opinions voiced by Maimonides in his discussion of individual providence and of God’s knowledge of particulars support the interpretation that Maimonides views God as being personally involved in dispensing rewards and punishments. Nonetheless, there are also opinions that he presents that are not in harmony with the view that God is directly involved in what happens to the individual. For example, he opens his discussion of the Torah’s approach to individual providence with the far-reaching claim:

It is likewise one of the fundamental principles of the Law of Moses our Master that it is in no way possible that He, may He be exalted should be unjust, and that all the calamities that befall men and the good things that come to men, be it a single individual or a group, are all of them determined according to the deserts of the men concerned through equitable judgment in which there is no injustice whatsoever. Thus if some individual were wounded in the hand by a thorn, which he would take out immediately, this would be a punishment for him, and if he received the slightest pleasure, this would be a reward for him—all this being according to his deserts. Thus He, may He be exalted, says: *For all His ways are judgment*, and so on [Deuteronomy 32:4]. But we are ignorant of the various modes of deserts. (*Guide* 3.17: 469)

24 Compare Maimonides’ distinction between true opinions and (politically) necessary ones in *Guide* 3.28.

While his remarks suggest that God is personally involved in all the goods and evils that befall every individual, he continues his discussion by arguing the view that individual providence is earned only by the righteous in accordance with their intellectual attainment:

It follows necessarily according to what I have mentioned in the preceding chapter that when any human individual has obtained, because of the disposition of his matter and his training, a greater portion of this overflow than others, providence will of necessity watch more carefully over him than over others—if, that is to say, providence is, as I have mentioned, consequent upon the intellect. Accordingly divine providence does not watch in an equal manner over all the individuals of the human species, but providence is graded as their human perfection is graded. In accordance with this speculation it follows necessarily that His providence, may He be exalted, that watches over the prophets is very great and proportionate to their degree in prophecy and that His providence that watches over excellent and righteous men is proportionate to their excellence and righteousness. For it is this measure of the overflow of the divine intellect that makes the prophets speak, guides the actions of righteous men, and perfects the knowledge of excellent men with regard to what they know. As for the ignorant and disobedient, their state is despicable proportionately to their lack of this overflow, and they have been relegated to the rank of the individuals of all the other species of animals: *He is like the beasts that speak not* [Psalms 49:13]. (*Guide* 3.18: 475)

According to this passage, ignorant-evil individuals do not merit individual providence at all, and from this perspective they are similar to animals. In the previous chapter, Maimonides did not leave even a shadow of doubt regarding his position concerning animals—God does not direct toward them the evils each one individually suffers or the goods each one enjoys, but they occur fortuitously. Each individual benefits solely from the general providence that belongs to it as a member of its species—that is, the means by which it can preserve its life for a period of time and propagate its species.

Maimonides essentially presents two different approaches to individual providence: 1) individual providence extends to all members of the human race equally, and it includes rewards and punishments in this world in accordance with a person's just deserts; 2) individual

providence is in accordance with the intellectual attainment of the individual and involves only the safeguarding of the righteous from evils. One who does not merit individual providence is exposed to all the evils that occur by chance. Even according to the second approach, Maimonides' position is open to two conflicting interpretations: A) God watches over the wise and righteous person directly, so individual providence is both personal and miraculous. B) Individual providence, like general providence, is naturalistic. The one who perfects his intellect and his character traits does not suffer from most of the evils that afflict those who pursue vain goals, such as the attainment of wealth, luxuries, and power. Moreover, the perfect individual attaches no importance to the physical evils that at times befall him. In his eyes they have no connection to final perfection, which is the perfection of the intellect. Finally, the essence of the person who attains ultimate perfection is that of pure intellect detached from the body, and is therefore unaffected by what happens to the bodily limbs. According to this interpretation, the physical evils that occur to human beings are not really fortuitous from the perspective of the one who is afflicted, insofar as they befall him because he had not attained perfection—and many could have been avoided if he had at least striven to attain it—even though they were not directed to him personally by the world order or by divine action. This interpretation is in harmony with Maimonides' exegesis of the story of Job, which he treats as a philosophical parallel.²⁵ It also holds the key to understanding Maimonides' perplexing remarks concerning providence in *Guide* 3.51, where he writes:

A most extraordinary speculation has occurred to me just now through which doubts may be dispelled and divine secrets revealed. We have already explained in the chapters concerning providence that providence watches over everyone endowed with intellect proportionately to the measure of his intellect. Thus providence always watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God.

²⁵ *Guide* 3.23-24. For a study of Maimonides' interpretation of the story of Job, see Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 43-77.

On the other hand, an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose thought sometimes for a certain time is emptied of God, is watched over by providence only during the time when he thinks of God; providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied with something else. . . . On the other hand, he who has no intellectual cognition at all of God is like one who is in darkness and has never seen light. . . . Hence it seems to me that all prophets or excellent and perfect men whom one of the evils of this world befell, had this evil happen to them during such a time of distraction, the greatness of the calamity being proportionate to the period of distraction or to the vileness of the matter with which he was occupied. . . . The providence of God, may He be exalted, is constantly watching over those who have obtained this overflow, which is permitted to everyone who makes efforts with a view to obtaining it. If a man's thought is free from distraction, if he apprehend Him, may He be exalted, in the right way and rejoices in what he apprehends, that individual can never be afflicted with evil of any kind, For he is with God and God is with him. When, however, he abandons Him, may He be exalted, and is thus separated from God and God separated from him, he becomes in consequence of this a target for every evil that may happen to befall him. For the thing that necessarily brings about providence and deliverance from the sea of chance consists in that intellectual overflow. Yet an impediment may prevent for some time its reaching the excellent and good man in question, or again it was not obtained at all by such and such imperfect and wicked man, and therefore the chance occurrences that befell them happened. To my mind this belief is also shown as true by a text of the Torah; He, may He be exalted, says: *And I will hide My face from them and they shall be devoured* . . . [Deuteronomy 31:17]. It is clear that we are the cause of this hiding of the face, and we are the agents who produce this separation. . . . Everyone who has rendered himself so worthy that the intellect in question overflows toward him, has providence attached to him, while all evils are prevented from befall him. (625-626)

Maimonides elaborates on the last point, interpreting Psalms 91 (Song on Mishaps) in accordance with this view:

He [David] then goes on to describe the protection against the plotting of men, saying: If you should happen to pass on your way a widely extended field of battle and even if one thousand were killed to your left and ten thousand to your right, no evil at all would befall you. . . . It is as if he said that this individual is protected because he

has known Me and passionately loved Me. You know the difference between the terms “one who loves” (*oheb*) and “one who loves passionately” (*hosheq*); an excess of love (*mahabbah*), so that no thought remains that is directed toward a thing other than the Beloved, is passionate love (*'ishq*). (626-627).²⁶

While Maimonides' remarks may be interpreted as indicating God's miraculous protection of the individual in question, they are best understood in accordance with the interpretation presented above. Individual providence is completely naturalistic, with the human intellect being the instrument of its expression and not only the reason for meriting it. God does not directly watch over the one who perfects his intellect; rather the perfection of the intellect allows the individual to avert many physical evils, and protects him from *suffering* physical evils even in instances when those evils affect his bodily state. This interpretation was suggested by some of Maimonides' medieval interpreters and echoed by some of his modern ones.²⁷ To reinforce this point, Maimonides concludes the chapter with a description of ecstatic death due to the strength of one's apprehension and passionate love of God, which he notes “in true reality is salvation from death.” In this manner, he indicates that the essence of this individual is that of pure intellect, unaffected by what happens to his bodily state, and he continues to persist in this state through eternity.

26 In regard to passionate love, compare Maimonides' remarks in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance 10.3. For a discussion of this issue, see Adiel Kadari, *Studies in Repentance: Law, Philosophy and Educational Thought in Maimonides' Hilkhot Teshuvah*, (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 245-252 (Heb.). For a discussion of the terms for love in Maimonides, see Steven Harvey, “The Meaning of Terms Designating Love in Judaeo-Arabic Thought and Some Remarks on the Judaeo-Arabic Interpretation of Maimonides,” in *Judaeo-Arabic Studies*, ed. Norman Golb (Amsterdam: Psychology Press, 1997), 175-196.

27 Samuel Ibn Tibbon suggests this interpretation in his letter to Maimonides; see Zevi Diesendruck, “Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon on Maimonides' Theory of Providence,” *HUCA* 11 (1936): 341-366. For modern interpreters who argue this view, see in particular Alvin Reines, “Maimonides' Concepts of Providence and Theodicy,” *HUCA* 43 (1972): 169-206; Charles Touati, “Les deux théories de Maïmonide sur la providence,” in *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History*, ed. Siegfried Stein and Raphael Loewe (Alabama: Alabama University Press, 1979), 331-344.

Returning to Maimonides' comments on prayer in *Guide* 3.36, we may conclude that he purposefully formulates his position in a manner that will be interpreted by the ordinary reader as maintaining that God personally punishes those who turn away from Him and will cease these punishments if they return to Him. This is what prompts the individual to pray to God and to reform his ways. Yet in light of Maimonides' approach to providence, we can appreciate the true purport of his remarks. Repenting from sins and embarking upon the path of righteousness are what prevents many of the same evils from afflicting the individual in the future, while obstinacy to continue in one's evil ways only brings in its wake more evils because of the lifestyle one leads. It is for this reason that Maimonides includes the commandment to repent in the class of commandments involving "fundamental principles," mentioning it immediately after the commandment to call upon God in times of crisis. It is clear according to his position that prayer alone will not help the individual if it is unaccompanied by a change of behavior. As opposed to the common believer, the non-perfect philosopher does not see the hand of God behind the evils befalling the individual, but regards them as fortuitous occurrences. This leads him to the completely erroneous conclusion that there is no connection between these evils and the behavior of the individual. In light of this conclusion he may see no reason to reform his ways, and, in turn, he will inevitably be afflicted by more evils. Only the true philosopher understands that there is an integral connection between the evils afflicting an individual and his behavior and the state of his intellect, even if the evils that befall an individual are not directed to him personally by the Deity. Thus Maimonides can label as a correct opinion the view that evils that befall us are not "fortuitous." Rather they are all tied to our failure to achieve perfection.

The special form of worship of those aspiring to perfection, described by Maimonides in *Guide* 3.51, adds yet a further perspective to the significance he attaches to prayer. Maimonides stresses the importance of contemplation during prayer rather than its formal aspect. His aim is to bring the Jew who observes the commandments to a state in which he continuously contemplates God even when he is

engaged in daily mundane tasks. Prayer serves as a crucial intermediate step in this process. Maimonides describes the process as follows:

Know that all the practices of the worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the other commandments, have only the end of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, may He be exalted, rather than with matters pertaining to this world; you should act as if you were occupied with Him, may He be exalted, and not with that which is other than He. If, however, you pray merely by moving your lips while facing a wall, and at the same time think about your buying and selling; or if you read the Torah with your tongue while your heart is set upon the building of your habitation and does not consider what you read; and similarly in all cases in which you perform a commandment merely with your limbs—as if you were digging a hole in the ground or hewing wood in the forest—without reflecting either upon the meaning of that action or upon Him from whom the commandment proceeds or upon the end of the action, you should not think that you have achieved the end. Rather you will then be similar to those of whom it is said: *You are near in their mouth, and far from their reins* [Jeremiah 12:2]. From here on I will begin to give you guidance with regard to the form of this training so that you should achieve this great end. The first thing that you should cause your soul to hold fast onto is that, while reciting the *Shema*’ prayer, you should empty your mind of everything and pray thus. You should not content yourself with being intent while reciting the first verse of *Shema*’ and saying the first benediction. When this has been carried out correctly and has been practiced consistently for years, cause your soul, whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed—the whole of you and your thought—toward reflection on what you are listening or reading. When this too has been practiced consistently for a certain time, cause your soul to be in such a way that your thought is always quite free of distraction and gives heed to all that you are reading of the other discourses of the prophets and even when you read all the benedictions, so that you aim at meditating on what you are uttering and at considering its meaning. If, however, while performing these acts of worship, you are free from distraction and not engaged in thinking upon any of the things pertain to this world, cause your soul—after this has been achieved—to occupy your thought with things necessary for you or superfluous in your life, and in general with worldly things, while you eat or drink or bathe or talk with your wife and your small children, or while you talk with the common run of people. . . . When, however, you are alone with

yourself and no one else is there and while you lie awake upon your bed, you should take great care during these precious times not to set your thought to work on anything other than that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence in that true reality that I have made known to you and not by way of affections of the imagination. In my opinion this end can be achieved by those of the men of knowledge who have rendered their souls worthy of it by training of this kind. And there may be a human individual who, through his apprehension of the true realities and his joy in what he has apprehended, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him, may He be exalted, so that in his heart he is always in His presence, may He be exalted, while outwardly he is with people. (622-623)

Prayer, according to this approach, is primarily an important means to the contemplation of God, by setting aside fixed periods of time for this purpose. Maimonides does not indicate in detail what should be the content of this contemplation, but he ties it to the true apprehension of God, in opposition to thoughts that are the product of one's imagination. He thereby alludes to contemplation of the truths of the natural sciences and metaphysics, or the divine science, which he describes at the beginning of the chapter when he speaks of the knowledge of the perfect ones who enter the palace of the king.

It appears that on this point one can discern a continuity between Maimonides' discussion of prayer in *Mishneh Torah* and his position in the *Guide*. At first glance it is surprising that he does not elaborate upon the notion of intent (*kavvanah*) in his presentation of the laws regarding prayer in the *Mishneh Torah*. Even when he deals with the laws pertaining to praying with intent, he does not elaborate upon this notion. He devotes only one clause or *halakhah* to define what type of intent is necessary:

What is the [proper] intent? He should empty his heart of all thoughts and view himself as though standing in the presence of God (*Shekbinah*). Therefore, one must sit awhile before prayer in order to focus one's heart, and afterwards pray in tranquility and with [feelings of] supplication. He should not pray as if bearing a burden that he discards and then departs. (Laws of Prayer 4.16)

Maimonides' formulation here is meant to be reminiscent of the description of the attainment of prophecy that he brings earlier in *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 7.1.²⁸ There he speaks of the individual's philosophic apprehension of all that exists. It appears that Maimonides did not wish to enter into detail concerning the contents of the proper intent, in order to enable each one to fulfill the command to pray in accordance with the level of his intellectual attainment. He does not eliminate the aspect of prayer as speaking to God or requesting one's needs. The implicit message he wishes to convey, however, is clear. Contemplation on the basis of true notions of God and His connection to the world is the primary purpose of prayer.

According to my interpretation of Maimonides' approach, the value of prayer for the masses is mainly pedagogical. The belief that God listens to prayers and answers them is, when understood literally, a necessary one for the masses in order to fortify their belief in God and their commitment to the Torah and its commandments. For those aspiring to true perfection, the commandment to pray mandates fixed times to be set aside for contemplation and encourages this activity. The question remains whether we can ascribe to prayer any additional value in an Aristotelian universe, either for the masses or for the intellectual elite. The tendency among the Jewish philosophers of Provence was to answer this question in the affirmative. As we have seen, Nissim shows how the demand to pray not only has educational value, but also brings in its wake practical benefits to the worshipper in this world as well as aiding him in his preparations to merit the next. Prayers are often answered, and not only those of the intellectually perfect, despite the fact that God is not cognizant of the individual and his prayers. Nissim presents the boldest expression of this approach, but he is not alone in holding it. He belongs to a Jewish philosophical school of thought in Provence that originated with Samuel Ibn Tibbon, who not only translated the *Guide* into Hebrew but was also the father of the esoteric philosophical approach to understanding Maimonides, as well

28 For a discussion of this point, see *Maimonides' Political Thought*, 245-252. See also Blidstein, *Prayer in Maimonidean Halakha*, 23-33.

as the Bible and rabbinic midrash.²⁹ Ibn Tibbon's family continued to develop this philosophical approach, and other Jewish philosophers in Provence followed in their footsteps, some of them who also touched upon the issue of prayer.

The Jewish Philosophers of Provence

One of the early Jewish philosophers who understood the significance of prayer in light of a naturalistic theory regarding divine providence is Samuel Ibn Tibbon's son, Moses.³⁰ In response to his father's query to Maimonides concerning the latter's theory of providence, Moses Ibn Tibbon argues that Maimonides' naturalistic view is close to transparent. Furthermore, he sees an affinity between Maimonides' approach and that of Ibn Ezra. Moses Ibn Tibbon divides providence into two types, both of them operating in a naturalistic manner, and he describes them as follows:

Verily the degree of God's providence and the saving of the wise from temporal calamities is proportionate to the degree of their wisdom and their intellect, since their heart and intellect more fully protect them from all that is in the province of intellect to guard against. It [the intellect] is the interceding angel,³¹ which is found in one among a thousand human beings, as it is written: *one man from a thousand I found* [Ecclesiastes 7:28]. But God's providence for His servants and righteous ones lies in His emanating upon them the divine prophetic wisdom after their attainment of the truths of the intellect. This is the superior form of providence, for in accordance to what reached their intellect from the perfect intellect, till they are in constant conjunction with Him, they are saved from all fortuitous events and mishaps. For they are constantly conjoined with God and the eye of God is upon them, so they will not suffer from any iniquity and crime. Abraham Ibn Ezra already said: "When the part [the individual] knows everything (*ba-kol*), it conjoins with

29 See, in particular, Ravitzky, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," 87-123. See also Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel Ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of Dalālat al-Hā'irīm into the Moreh Nevukhim*, (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007) (Heb.).

30 On this thinker and his works see above, chapter 4.

31 See Job 33:23; cf. *Guide* 3.23.

the All (*ba-kol*), and it creates in everything signs and wonders.”³² Insofar as the heart of the individual who has attained this level is with God, there will be revealed to him the things that will occur and all their contingent characteristics, and he will then escape them and counter them by prayer and divine service and by his knowledge of the decrees of the heavenly rulers of the earth [that is to say, of the stars], and by his change of name and location, and he will avoid the astrological decree destined for him and annul the effects of the constellations.³³

For Moses Ibn Tibbon, prophecy is the primary expression of the higher form of providence, for through it one learns of future evils to be avoided and one may even attain the ability to perform miracles.³⁴ While Maimonides does not mention foreknowledge explicitly as an expression of providence, it certainly is implicit in his approach.³⁵ However, Ibn Tibbon, taking his cue from Ibn Ezra rather than Maimonides, ties foreknowledge not only with prophecy but also with knowledge of astrology—a view that comes to dominate Jewish philosophy in Provence despite Maimonides’ polemical stance against it.³⁶ It is clear from the passage just cited that Ibn Tibbon sees prayer as one of the measures that help counter the evils destined to befall the individual, but he does not elaborate on why this is so. As we have seen above, it is precisely this problem that Nissim addresses in his comments on the efficacy of prayer.

In his *Sefer Pe’ab*, Ibn Tibbon devotes a chapter to a discussion of the commandment to pray. In this context, he essentially follows

32 See Ibn Ezra’s commentary to Numbers 20:8.

33 Diesendruck, “Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon on Maimonides’ Theory of Providence,” 363-364.

34 On the prophet as miracle worker in Ibn Ezra’s thought, see Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Anthropological Theory of Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1984), 231-272. See also above, chapter 9, 321.

35 In *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 10.3, Maimonides goes so far as to view divination as the main public function of prophecy.

36 For a study of astrology in medieval Jewish thought see Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1999) (Heb.). For Maimonides’ critique of astrology, see, for example, Y. Tzvi Langermann, “Maimonides’ Repudiation of Astrology,” *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991): 123-158.

Maimonides' pedagogical approach. One of the questions he addresses is why the Sages chose the word *tefillah* for prayer, which comes from the root meaning to pass judgment, and not the word meaning thanks (*boda'ah*) or supplication (*teḥinnah*). He answers as follows:

Perhaps because the nature of the human being is for each individual to request help from his Lord, and to implore Him to grant him all his needs, and to thank him for all the goodness [He bestowed upon him]—it was called *tefillah* in order to awaken him to the fact that all of God's actions are righteous and just, and his own deeds will bring him closer [to God] or distance him. In accordance with his conjunction with God will be the providence he attains and his being safeguarded. He should justify God for both the good and the evil³⁷

In this passage we see that prayer for Ibn Tibbon is essentially a call to introspection rather than a call to God.

In his encyclopedia *Livyat Hen*,³⁸ Levi ben Avraham, a younger contemporary of Moses Ibn Tibbon,³⁹ also devotes a chapter to a discussion of prayer.⁴⁰ As in the case of Maimonides, he does not explicitly negate the idea that God listens to the prayers of human beings, and he even opens the chapter with the statement: “We are obligated to believe that God accepts the prayer of one who prays before Him with a pure heart.”⁴¹ Yet from the continuation of the chapter, one can clearly discern that God in Levi's view does not act in a direct and personal manner toward the worshipper. Like his philosophical predecessors,

37 *The Writings of R. Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Howard Kreisel, Colette Sirat, and Avraham Israel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2010), 143 (Heb.).

38 On this encyclopedia and its author, see above, chapter 5.

39 As pointed out in chapter 5, Levi was in close contact with Ibn Tibbon in the period when they both lived in Montpellier, and he borrows heavily from his writings.

40 Unfortunately, this chapter has survived only in the shorter version of the encyclopedia and it appears in Levi ben Avraham, *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, ed. Howard Kreisel (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2014), 21-27 (Heb.). For an English translation of this chapter, see the appendix below.

41 *Ibid.*, 21.

Levi stresses the importance of praying with the proper thoughts. Prayer should be said aloud in order to strengthen one's intent and concentration. The purpose of prayer is to attain conjunction with God and the world of the Separate Intellects. Levi is very critical of the masses, who are more concerned with the outer trappings of the prayer service, and by way of his criticism one can learn of some of the customs involving prayer in Provence in the second half of the thirteenth century. Levi's mastery of Jewish legal and homiletic literature finds its expression throughout the chapter. Legal discourses and midrashic opinions are all interpreted in light of his philosophic approach.

Levi distinguishes between two forms of prayer: praise and requests. Praise is the primary form in his view, and it essentially takes the form of contemplating God and His acts. Levi notes that it is regarding this form of prayer that the Talmud remarks: "Would that he prays the entire day."⁴² This form of prayer also results in foreknowledge enabling the worshipper to save himself from impending evils. In this manner, Levi notes, God heeds the prayer of the worshipper without experiencing any change thereby.⁴³

Even the more moderate Maimonideans in Provence were influenced by this philosophic approach to prayer, as we can see in the case of the early fourteenth-century thinker David ben Samuel HaKokhavi:⁴⁴

One of my colleagues engaged in speculation asked me: insofar as it is within the person's choice to choose the path of goodness and truth, why pray to God to guide us in His commandments and show us His path and return us to Him when the matter is dependent upon our choice? I responded to him that according to our belief, when we

42 Ibid., 23.

43 Ibid., 26.

44 For a brief description of HaKokhavi's composition *Sefer ha-Batim*, or *Kiryat Sefer* as the treatise was called by the author, see above, chapter 10, note 23. HaKokhavi was almost certainly acquainted with Levi's encyclopedia and draws numerous interpretations from it; see Gavriel Hanuka, "The Philosophy and Halakhic Theory of R. David d'Estelle" (PhD thesis, Bar-Ilan University, 2014) (Heb.), who points out many parallels between the two thinkers. Levi is never mentioned by name, but numerous opinions brought by HaKokhavi in the name of "one of the men of speculation," including in his discussion of prayer, can be found in Levi's encyclopedia.

pray to Him with intent, He hears our prayers and will remove from us the obstacles to knowing His path and the truth. The prophets and those speaking by means of the Holy Spirit already spoke of this in several places, together with the fact that the purpose of prayer is to serve as a reminder to the intelligent to transform their potential intellect into an actual one, and then they will speak by means of the Active Intellect and unite with it.⁴⁵

While HaKokhavi appears to be of the opinion that God personally aids the worshipper to achieve the desired end, though this point requires further investigation, the end itself that he posits is identical to that posited by the Aristotelian philosophers, with prayer serving as an important pedagogical aid in achieving it. Throughout his discussion, HaKokhavi reiterates the point that the proper intent in prayer is to comprehend God in accordance with human ability.⁴⁶ At the foundation of prayer are not the various requests on the part of the worshipper or even his praises of God, but the contemplation of God and attainment of the truths grasped by the intellect.

The final thinker I wish to explore is Gersonides, who composed his works in the first half of the fourteenth century.⁴⁷ Unfortunately, in his philosophic *magnum opus*, *The Wars of the Lord*, Gersonides does not deal with prayer. He mentions it only in passing in the context of his discussion of miracles, the topic with which he closes his treatise. He points out the fact that often miracles occurred as a result of the prayer of the prophet,⁴⁸ and goes on to analyze the connection between miracles and prophecy. He views both phenomena as expressions of individual providence. According to Gersonides, miracles result from the activity of the Active Intellect in response to the level of perfection

45 *Sefer ha-Batim*, vol. 2 (*Sefer Mizvah*), ed. Moshe Hershler (Jerusalem: Makhon Shalem, 1983), 87; See Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom*, 205.

46 *Sefer ha-Batim*, vol. 2, 82, 86, 88-90.

47 For a study of Gersonides and his thought, see Charles Touati, *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonide* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1973). See also Seymour Feldman, *Gersonides: Judaism within the Limits of Reason* (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010).

48 *The Wars of the Lord* 6.2.9, trans. Seymour Feldman, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 471.

attained by the prophet and his achievement of “conjunction,”⁴⁹ without the Active Intellect being aware of those who merit this special type of providence. Gersonides essentially posits two types of order operating in the world. The first is the natural order of the stars and the powers emanating from them upon the earth. This order not only determines all changes in sublunar matter, but even influences the individual’s thoughts and choices. Human beings, however, have the power to choose to act in a manner that is contrary to these influences, in accordance with the directives of the intellect. The second order is that of the impersonal activity of the Active Intellect vis-à-vis those who reach the level of perfection, which enables them to receive from it a special emanation. This emanation assumes the form of prophetic divination, or similar phenomena, which enables the individual to foresee the evils that are to occur as a result of the influence of the stars and escape them. This special emanation from the Active Intellect at times even results in the neutralization of the negative influences from the stars on this individual, as well as others with whom he is in contact. Gersonides apparently sees prayer as helping the prophet prepare himself to achieve the state in which he merits this special emanation that results in the occurrence of miracles on his behalf.⁵⁰

In his commentaries on the Bible, Gersonides deals with prayer in several passages. It should be noted that he does not adopt a different philosophical approach in his commentaries from the one he presents in the *The Wars of the Lord*.⁵¹ Moreover, he often refers the reader to the

49 “Conjunction” (*devekut*) in the writings of Gersonides does not indicate an ontological state, but the level of perfection of the intellect by virtue of which a person merits prophecy or miracles occurring on his behalf. For a study of this topic, see Seymour Feldman, “Gersonides on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Agent Intellect,” *AJS Review* 3 (1978): 99-120.

50 I touched upon Gersonides’ view of miracles and providence above, chapter 9, 337-342. For a further study of this issue see *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 392-396.

51 For a study of philosophic ideas in Gersonides’ biblical commentaries, see, for example, Seymour Feldman, “Gersonides and Biblical Exegesis,” in his translation of *The Wars of the Lord*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 213-247. See also Charles Touati, “Les idées philosophiques et théologiques de Gersonide dans ses commentaires bibliques,” *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 28

relevant section in his philosophic treatise where he deals in depth with a notion that he mentions in his commentary. Nevertheless, insofar as the commentaries were intended for a more general Jewish audience than the one for which his philosophic treatise was intended, he presents his views in them in a manner more appropriate for a traditional audience. In general, he avoids mentioning the activity of the Active Intellect, ascribing its activity directly to God instead, particularly those actions that result from the attainment of individual providence. The impression many of his comments leave on the average reader is that God is in fact capable of acting in a personal manner.

For example, commenting on Genesis 25:21—*And Isaac entreated God for his wife because she was barren*—he writes: “When it became clear to Isaac that the failure to give birth was due to his wife and not to him, he prayed to God, may He be exalted, on behalf of his wife that He mend her ability to give birth by way of a miracle, so that she could give birth for him. God, may He be exalted, heard his prayer and she became pregnant.”⁵² At the end of the section, in the second lesson he brings regarding this story, Gersonides elaborates on this view: “Concerning opinions, it informs us that God, may He be exalted, watches over those conjoining with Him, to grant them the benefits they request, not only for themselves but also for their loved ones. The reason for this is that they are distressed when benefits are denied their loved ones. As a consequence, God, may He be exalted, brings the benefits to their loved ones in order to alleviate the distress, which is a type of evil, from those who conjoin with Him. Thus you find that Isaac’s prayer to have sons by Rebecca is granted him.”⁵³ The reader who is not acquainted with Gersonides’ philosophic approach will not find in his comments any idea that is problematic from a traditional perspective, nor will he be sensitive enough to the problem that Gersonides

(1954): 335-367; Robert Eisen, *Gersonides on Providence, Covenant, and the Chosen People* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

52 Ralbag, *Commentary on Genesis*, ed. Baruch Braner and Eli Freiman (Jerusalem: Maaliyot, 1993), 333 (Heb.).

53 *Ibid.*, 336.

wishes to solve—namely, if individual providence is attained by a person as a result of the perfection he achieved without God being cognizant of him, how can those who did not achieve this perfection (in this case, Rebecca) still merit individual providence? His answer is that the providence in this case is really attained by Isaac and not Rebecca. One may claim with a great deal of justice that Gersonides does not present a cogent explanation for how God can “answer” Isaac’s prayer without being acquainted either with him, his prayer, or Rebecca—a problem I have discussed in a different context.⁵⁴ It is important to stress, however, that Gersonides thought that his approach to individual providence did in fact supply a cogent explanation for these miraculous events, and in the context of this approach he understands the efficacy of prayer.

The connection between prayer, perfection, and conjunction emerges from other passages in his commentaries. For example, in his commentary on Exodus 9:29, he mentions the importance of location and mental “isolation” (*hitbodedut*) in Moses’ preparations, in order that his prayer be heeded. In his commentary to Deuteronomy 4, lesson 1, he ties the praise of God at the beginning of Moses’ prayer to his apprehension of God, which prepares him for individual providence and enables his subsequent entreaty to be granted. These ideas are reiterated in his commentaries on other biblical books as well.⁵⁵ At times Gersonides does not limit the possibility of conjunction to the intellectually perfect, but sees others having attained this state as a result of prayer.⁵⁶ What is critical is that the individual pray with the proper intent; Gersonides does not attach any particular significance to the specific words that are uttered. He also discusses the limits of what can be accomplished by means of prayer. He explains that it is forbidden to pray for that which is conceptually impossible—for example, that

54 See *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, 440-444.

55 See, for example, his commentary to I Samuel 1:3; II Samuel 22:4; II Samuel 24, lesson 3; I Kings 8:39-52; I Kings 11, lessons 24, 28, 29; Job 33:33.

56 See, for example, his commentary to I Samuel 7, lessons 7 and 12.

God change the past—but one can pray for other types of miracles.⁵⁷ Despite the fact that Gersonides formulates his exegetical comments in a manner that suggests that the heeding of the worshipper's prayer is due to God's miraculous intercession, it is clear that one must understand them in accordance with the approach to providence he presents in his philosophical treatise. The order of the world, particularly the emanation flowing from the Active Intellect, is designed to answer the prayers of those attaining the level of conjunction, without God being acquainted with the worshipper or his prayers.

In conclusion, the approach to prayer on the part of the more radical Jewish philosophers in Provence, who remained committed to the Torah and its commandments, and even of Maimonides himself, reflects a sharp break from the traditional conception of God being personally aware of the individual's prayers and who has the power to grant the worshipper's requests. No room was now left for any immediate connection between God and the worshipper. The significance of prayer was understood in light of the impersonal workings of the world order, with the stress placed on the salutary effects of the act of prayer on the worshipper himself. Contemplation of philosophical truths was viewed as the ultimate form of prayer, and conjunction with the Active Intellect its ultimate goal. Even those not attaining this goal were shown to benefit from prayer in a variety of ways. These philosophers attempted to guide their readers to an appreciation of this view, which at the same time would lead to a purer form of worship. This approach was certainly not the only one to be found among the followers of Maimonides in Provence, though even the more moderate camp was strongly influenced by it. Much of subsequent Jewish philosophy, particularly in Spain, attempted to present an alternative approach to God's relationship with the world, one in which God was cognizant of the individual's prayers and could heed them, while showing that this relationship did not negate His being the absolute, unchanging One. This, however, is another story.

57 See his commentary to II Samuel 21, lesson 45.

Appendix: *Livyat Hen*: On the Explanation of the Secret of Prayer⁵⁸

We are obligated to believe that God accepts the prayer of one who prays to Him with a pure heart and refined and unpolluted thought, and clings to Him with the appropriate intent—or the hearer has intent when the speaker has intent⁵⁹—since it is known that prayer is ineffective without intent, as they said: “The worshipper must focus his heart” [BT Berakhot 31a], and they also said: “A person must always gauge himself; if he can focus—he should pray” [BT Berakhot 30b]. If he prays without intent, his prayer is not a prayer, and he should go back and pray with intent.⁶⁰ They said: “According to the intent of the heart are the words” [BT Megillah 20b]. Therefore the men of antiquity would tarry for an hour and then pray.⁶¹ For this reason it [prayer] is called “service of the heart,” in order that one remove from one’s heart the vanities of the world. They commanded to stand in prayer after engaging in words of Torah,⁶² since the intent and [mental] representation is the principal thing that Scripture commands, as it is stated: *Ponder it on your bed and sigh* [Psalms 4:5].⁶³ He censured the one who utters the name of God with his mouth and lips, but his heart is far from Him.⁶⁴ The law is in accordance with Rabbi Judah, who says that if he did not utter it [the *Shema*] while hearing it with his ears, he fulfills his obligation.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, one must do so *de jure*, as we learnt in a *baraita*: “A person should not say the blessing after meals in his heart, but if he does, he fulfills his obligation”

58 The translation of this chapter is based on my edition, *Livyat Hen: The Secrets of the Faith and the Gate of the Haggadah*, 21-27.

59 In the case when one does not pray oneself but hears the prayer of another. The person fulfills his obligation if he so intended while listening and the reciter also intended that the hearer fulfill his obligation.

60 See BT Berakhot 30b; *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 4.15.

61 Mishnah Berakhot 5.1.

62 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 4.18.

63 See BT Berakhot 4b.

64 See Isaiah 29:13.

65 BT Berakhot 15a.

[BT Berakhot 15a]. Verily, by the utterance with the lips the intent adheres and is strengthened.

It is stated: “Rabba did not decree a fast on a cloudy day” [BT Berakhot 32b]. The reason for this is that the intellect is turbid on a day of clouds, because the power of the soul is pure when the air is pure. It is a separating partition,⁶⁶ [preventing] one from focusing in a suitable manner.⁶⁷ It is stated: *You have screened yourself off with a cloud, that no prayer may pass through* [Lamentations 3:44], for iniquities are an obstructing cloud, as it is stated: Your iniquities have separated [you from your Lord] [Isaiah 59:2].⁶⁸

Chapter “From When does One Mention”: “The prayer of a person is not heard unless he places his soul in his hand, as it is stated: *Let us lift up our hearts to our hands to the Lord in the heavens* [Lamentations 3:41]” etc. [BT Ta’anit 8a]. But due to our worries and discords in exile, our intent is not pure.⁶⁹ We learnt in Tractate ‘Eruvin [65a]: “R. Eliezer said: I could have exonerated the entire world from the [failure to fulfill properly the] law of prayer, as it is stated: *Hear now this, those who are afflicted and drunken but not from wine* [Isaiah 51:21].” They also said: “One who prays must set his eyes to what is below and his heart to what is above” [BT Yevamot 105b]. They commanded to prolong the saying of [the word] “one” [in the first verse of the *Shema*], in order to anoint Him as king in all six directions,⁷⁰ but one need not sway one’s head in the manner that the masses do. The person should awaken and accustom his intellect to be in *actu* by means of prayer, as

66 This idea is taken from the *Guide* 3.9 and 3.51, though Levi interprets it in a more literal manner. The notion that weather conditions influence one’s ability to think is tied to the doctrine of climatology, which underlies the talmudic dictum in BT Baba Batra 158b: “The air of the Land of Israel makes one wise.” For a study of this doctrine in medieval Jewish philosophy see Alexander Altmann, “The Climatological Factor in Judah Halevi’s Theory of Prophecy,” *Melilab* 1 (1944): 1-16 (Heb.); Abraham Melamed, “The Land of Israel and Climatology in Jewish Thought,” in *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought*, ed. Moshe Hallamish and Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zevi, 1991), 52-78 (Heb.).

67 Cf. Moses Ibn Tibbon’s explanation in *Sefer Pe’ab*, 31 (*The Writings of Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 145-147).

68 See BT Sanhedrin 65b; Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*, chapter 7.

69 Cf. *Guide* 2.36.

70 See BT Berakhot 13b.

signified [by the verse]: *Be close to Him and wholehearted* [Job 22:21]. He should prepare his heart to unite with his Creator and to merge (*tit'arev*) with the Pure Forms.⁷¹ He will be aroused to believe in God and His might, and that everything originates from Him, and that He is the foundation of everything, the absolute One without beginning, the true One.⁷²

Know that there are two categories of prayer. The first category, which is the more worthy, is to unify God and to mention His praises and His acts, as they said: “One should always arrange His praises” etc. [BT Rosh HaShanah 35a]. This is called “service of the heart.” They also said: “One who says: *A psalm of David* [Psalms 145:1] three times a day [is guaranteed a place in the World to Come]” [BT Berakhot 4b]. They interpret these words to refer to verses requesting mercy, but “one who completes the *hallel* every day is a curser and blasphemer” [BT Shabbat 118b]. They said this, however, in order that one should not emulate the heretics who recite it every day, since it states: *I am your servant the son of your maidservant [amah]* [Psalms 116:16].⁷³ Our master Solomon [Rashi] interpreted the *son of your maidservant* as indicating that the [more exalted] servant is the one born of a domestic maidservant.⁷⁴ It appears that he [David] exalted in the fact that he found a woman of valor who craved her husband and was observant of the service of God.⁷⁵ Regarding this type of thanksgiving and praise,

71 That is to say, the Separate Intellects, or more specifically, the Active Intellect. See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 7.1. Maimonides not only uses the term “Pure Forms” to designate the Separate Intellects but also the word *tit'arev* to signify conjunction, and not the Hebrew word *tidbaq*. Both these terms are a translation of the Arabic word *yittisal*, which Maimonides employs in the sixth principle of faith in his *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*.

72 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Principles of the Torah 1.1-7.

73 It appears that Levi is referring here to a Christian custom, based on the view that these psalms contain allusions to Jesus and the Virgin Birth (*amah* being translated by Christians as a young virgin). I did not find, however, any source for this custom in the Christian orders of prayers in the Middle Ages.

74 As opposed to one who was purchased in the market.

75 That is to say, his soul was in a body that faithfully served it in its striving for perfection, which is the true service of God. This metaphorical allusion, based on Ecclesiastes, is found in *Guide*, introduction and 3.8. Maimonides contrasts the faithful supportive wife with the one who is a harlot, that is to say, the body that seduces the soul to pursue corporeal pleasures.

they said: “Would that a person pray the entire day” [BT Berakhot 21a]. Only he should not elaborate upon the divine attributes, in order not to belong to the group of whom it is said: *They lied to Him with their tongues* [Psalms 78:36]. We learnt: “Someone who came into the presence of Rabbi Ḥaninah said [in prayer]: God the Great, the Valiant, the Terrible, the Mighty, the Powerful, the Courageous and the Tremendous. Thereupon [Rabbi Ḥaninah] said to him: Have you finished all the praises of your Master?” [BT Berakhot 33b].⁷⁶ We learnt in the chapter “One who Recites”: “R. Eliezer said: One who speaks too much in the praise of God is uprooted from the world, as it is stated: *Is anything conveyed to Him when I speak* [Job 37:20]” [BT Megillah 18a].

Chapter “One who Sees”: “Let the words of a person be few before the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is stated: *Keep your mouth from being rash and let not your throat be quick to bring forth speech before the Lord* [Ecclesiastes 5:1]” [BT Berakhot 61a]. Yet one should elaborate upon the greatness, goodness, and righteous kindness of His acts, which are innumerable. No one can discern most of the types of perfection and equilibrium that are found in all the existents, and their nature and power and special qualities. The forms, figures, and characteristics, and the types of appearance, colors, and sounds generated and produced by nature are endless.

It is a matter of custom to praise God in song and *to raise a shout to Him with psalms* [Psalms 95:2], for by means of [song] a person will improve and his thought will be aroused and his soul will be joyous and the conjunction will be strengthened. Yet even regarding this type [of prayer] it is said that one for whom Torah is his craft is exempt from prayer.⁷⁷ This is due to its fundamental superiority, for there is nothing more honorable than it. Furthermore, one who is engaged in the fulfillment of a commandment is exempt from prayer⁷⁸—for this is superior to Torah—unless one can fulfill both at one time. What is stated in the

76 See *Guide* 1.59, cited above, 406-407.

77 See BT Shabbat 11a. This refers to a person who devotes himself entirely to the study of Torah.

78 See BT Succah 26a.

Tosefta: “One who engages in Torah is exempt from phylacteries,”⁷⁹ is due to the fact that the phylacteries require guarding and one should not let one’s thought wander from them, and also because the phylacteries are meant to serve as a reminder and an allusion, and for safeguarding. It was expounded: “A *prayer to Habakkuk* [Habakkuk 1:1]. It should have stated: A psalm (*tevilla*). This comes to teach: Everyone who engages with the Account of the Chariot for one hour is treated by Scripture as though he prayed the entire day” [*Babir*, 65].

The second category [of prayer] is the request of material needs. Of this category they said: “Can a person pray the entire day? [It was already explained by Daniel: *And three times a day* etc. [Daniel 6:11]” [BT Berakhot 31a]. For it is not good to add to this, as we find: “Rabba came upon R. Hamnuna, who was multiplying his prayers. He said to him: They abandon eternal life and engage in temporal life” [BT Shabbat 10a]. The Sages said: “The Holy One, blessed be He, loves meeting places that are distinguished by [the study of] law more than all the synagogues” etc. [BT Berakhot 8a]. Torah and wisdom are “eternal life”; “more than all the synagogues,” which are “temporal life.” This is what they intended when they said: “One should not request his needs in Aramaic, for the ministering angels will not heed him for they are not acquainted with Aramaic” [BT Shabbat 12b]. That is to say, one should not overly elaborate upon requests for the needs of this world, and this is what he [the Sage] referred to as “Aramaic.” This is similar to what they meant when they said: “One should not sit on a bed of an Aramaean woman” [BT Berakhot 8b].⁸⁰

We learnt in the chapter “They Brought out to him the Ladle”: “They said in the name of Shemayah: He should pronounce ‘peace’ [at the end of the *Amidah* prayer] towards the right and then towards his left, as it is stated: *At His right hand was a fiery law unto them* [Deuteronomy 33:2], and it is stated: *A thousand may fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand* [Psalms 91:7]. . . . Rabba saw that he [Abaye] pronounced ‘peace’ first towards the right. He said to him: Why do you

⁷⁹ This ruling is brought in the Mekhilta, tractate Pisha, 17.

⁸⁰ Levi interprets “an Aramaean woman” as a reference to sexual craving. Cf. *The Writings of Moshe Ibn Tibbon*, 144-145.

suppose that your right hand is meant? Your left is the right of the Holy One, blessed be He” [BT Yoma 53b]. The interpretation of what was said in the name of Shemaya is: “He should pronounce ‘peace’ towards the right,” means towards the right of the Holy One, blessed be He, which is the left of the person, because the heart is there, which is the organ of the intellect, and there the Torah is found, which is to the right of the Holy One, blessed be He. Afterwards he should pronounce “peace” towards his right, which is the left of the Holy One, blessed be He. The reason for this is that the liver is mostly on the right side, which is the fountain of corporeal desire, and from it comes rebellion and sin. For this reason he cited: *A thousand may fall at your side and ten thousand at your right hand* [Psalms 91:7], that is to say, he further asks of God to grant him peace from the numerous desires that are found on the right side, and He should make peace between the hosts on high and the hosts below.⁸¹ This is how it appears to me to interpret [the talmudic dictum]. He understood this by way of analogy to standing in front of a king of flesh and blood, with his left side being opposite the right side of the king and his right opposite [the king’s] left, as our Master Moses [Maimonides] wrote in chapter five of the Laws of Prayer.⁸² This is similar to: *I have set God always before me; surely He is at my right hand* [Psalms 16:8].

[Maimonides], may his memory be blessed, also said: “There is no doubt that what is true of one is true of the community” [*Guide* 3.51].⁸³ It appears to me that for this reason the prayer of the community is the chosen one, for there generally will be found one or two select individuals. Moreover, the more select individuals there are, the more the emanation and the greater the good.⁸⁴ God causes [His

81 See BT Berakhot 16b-17a. Levi interprets the “hosts on high” as referring to the powers of the intellect and the “hosts below” to the powers of the body.

82 See *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 5.11.

83 Levi employs this dictum in a different manner than does Maimonides. Maimonides uses it to signify that what is true of the community—the absence of providence because of the community breaking their connection to God—is true also in the case of the individual. Levi wishes to signify that the fate of the individual and the fate of the community are interdependent. The blessing that falls upon the community includes also the individuals not worthy of it, and vice versa.

84 Cf. *Kuzari* 3.19.

Indwelling to] dwell upon the notables of Israel who extoll Him in truth, that He sits

Know that by way of true prayer which is said with intent a person conjoins with the Active Intellect and reaches its level, hence [it is said]: [God] *acquiesced to his entreaty* [Genesis 25:21]. The Sages said: “*I Supplicated [va-ethannan – reflexive form of the verb] to God* [Deuteronomy 3:23]. It should be: *va-ethannan* [intensive form]! This teaches us that Moses made himself into supplications.”⁸⁵ This is also the meaning [of their dictum]: “How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, prays [BT Berakhot 7a].”⁸⁶

When God hears the prayer of His servants and righteous ones and guards them, no change of will and alteration in Him ensues thereby. By virtue of prayer and conjunction with God, a power emanates [upon them], which preserves them and informs them by way of dreams, or in a different manner, of future calamities and what troubles are about to occur. It teaches them the way to protect themselves from what is fated by the constellations, without any change in the will of the higher beings and suspension of their power.⁸⁷ For example, the sage by knowing the evil that is destined to befall a city—by war, pestilence, or an earthquake that overturns cities and destroys nations—can leave the city together with his progeny and be saved. Or he planned to take an ocean voyage and God preserved him and prevented him from embarking.⁸⁸ This is similar to the parable presented by Ibn Ezra of a horse running on a track. The wise turn to the sides of the road while the blind and foolish stand in the middle of the road and walk along the thoroughfare of the city and are trampled by the feet of the horse,⁸⁹ in the manner that Solomon said:

85 I was not able to locate the source of this citation. For a similar midrash, see BT Sanhedrin 44a; Deuteronomy Rabbah 2.4.

86 That is to say, God’s “prayer” is His Self-Contemplation.

87 In accordance with the medieval Aristotelian view that the spheres possess a rational soul and the will to imitate God by their perfect motion and the forces that flow from them that sustain everything on earth; see *Guide* 2.4, 7.

88 And the ship subsequently capsizes; see *Guide* 3.17.

89 See Abraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary to Exodus 33:21. The constellations are likened to a galloping horse.

A prudent man foresees evil and hides; the foolish continue on and are punished [Proverbs 22:3].

I [now] see fit to explain a certain prayer that concerns the matter with which we are dealing, and many have fallen short in grasping its meaning. It is as follows: We learnt in the chapter “The Morning Prayer”: “One who travels in a place of danger should pray a short prayer. What is ‘a short prayer?’ R. Eliezer says: ‘May You do Your will in Heaven, and grant satisfaction to those who fear you below, and do what is good in Your eyes. Blessed be the One who hears prayer’” [BT Berakhot 29b]. In my opinion, the gist of the matter is: “Even though You fulfill Your desires and decrees in heaven and the powers of the stars do not change, grant satisfaction to those who fear you to accept willingly those decrees, or grant them a way to avoid harm from the constellations, and preserve them from [evil] incidents. We know that You undergo no change or affectation in this matter, for this is always Your will that has no beginning, and You forever do what is good in Your eyes.” We may also interpret “and do what is good in Your eyes”: on many occasions we cannot discern what is truly good for us, so You should choose and not I. In this manner we should interpret our saying in the blessing after meals on the Sabbath: “Grant us in accordance with Your wish,” that is to say, grant us repose that is in accordance with Your wish. This is similar to what we say in the formulation [of the prayer] “You are One”:⁹⁰ “A complete repose that You wish.” Or the meaning of “in accordance with Your wish” is: as You designated for us by Your prophet.

90 In the afternoon service of the Sabbath.



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